STREET SPIRIT

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JUSTICE NEWS & HOMELESS BLUES IN THE BAY AREA

Planting the Seeds of Freedom and Justice

Rev. Phil Lawson and the National Council of Elders — A Lifelong Commitment to Peace, Justice and Freedom

by Rev. Phil Lawson

The National Council of Elders was started in Oakland in 2009. I invited Dr. Vincent Harding, a historian who worked with Dr. King and was a speechwriter for Martin Luther King, and I invited my brother, Rev. James Lawson, a Methodist minister who was a confidante of Martin Luther King, to come to Oakland to speak in 2009. Jim had trained Martin in nonviolence and trained the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the philosophy and practices of nonviolence.

Jim Lawson said that in the 20th century, the world witnessed the greatest advancements in human freedom that had ever before been achieved in the history of the world. That century saw the greatest advances in freedom and justice and humanity, more than ever before in history. But many people were ignorant of this and did not relish it or learn from it.

Out of that discussion in Oakland came the concept that there should be a National Council of Elders. Elders are, of course, persons of a certain age. But more importantly, many elders are persons who for the last 30, 40 or 50 years, have been working for justice and freedom and empowerment of people in the United States.

So we began to gather the names of men and women from the major movements of the 20th century: The labor movement, Dr. King's movement, the youth movement, the Free Speech movement, and the women's movement. We began to talk with the individuals from those movements to see if they would be a part of the National Council of Elders for the purpose of teaching the lessons of the 20th century so that we might transfer those lessons to the young people of the 21st century who are engaged in movements and engaged in being human beings and struggling with that in our nation.

Out of that beginning, Jim and Vincent and I began to organize the National Council of Elders. Then, in 2012, in Greensboro, North Carolina, the National

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Rev. Phil Lawson, a cofounder of the National Council of Elders, speaks at St. Mary's Center in Oakland during Black History Month. Janny Castillo photo

Finding Moral Beauty in the Lives of the Poor

by Terry Messman

For almost 30 years, Peter Marin has been fighting to protect the human rights of homeless people from never-ending attacks by politicians who employ every means at their disposal to banish the poor with an oppressive array of segregation laws.

It has often been a solitary struggle. Marin's steadfast opposition to the efforts to criminalize homelessness has made him somewhat of an anathema to the merchants and city officials who try to eliminate street people from affluent seaside Santa Barbara.

Marin is an uncommonly intelligent analyst of the cruel conditions endured by homeless people in America. A former university professor, prolific author, poet, and journalist for *Harper's Magazine, The Nation*, and *Psychology Today,* Marin is the founder of the Committee for Social Justice in Santa Barbara — and a man who has stood in solidarity with homeless people, in season and out. Above all, he is a gadfly who stings the consciences of conservative and liberal lawmakers alike who try to legislate the poor out of existence.

Marin first stumbled upon the hidden landscape of homelessness — an immense and virtually unexplored subcontinent of multitudes cast out of mainstream society — after he graduated from Swarthmore College and Columbia University with a master's degree in literature and an unquenchable case of wanderlust.

He soon enrolled in a new field of "post-graduate" study by hopping freight trains rolling through the night, riding hundreds of miles across the countryside while doing seasonal work as a crop-picker.



***"Depression Bread Line."* George Segal's sculpture at the FDR Memorial in Washington, D.C., reveals the poverty of a nation.**

As a restless wanderer riding the rails, he came to greatly respect his companions riding in midnight boxcars and sleeping in hobo jungles. Those days on the road ended up etched indelibly on his mind and heart.

Looking back on those nomadic days in his recent article, "The Moral Beauty of Acts of Goodness and Justice" [*Street Spirit,* January 2014], Marin wrote that he witnessed acts of sharing and kindness from the hungry and ragged men riding the rails that contained more beauty than could be found in acclaimed art museums.

The men he met in hobo jungles were "quite willing to share with one another and with me their shelter and last bits of food and cared for each other in a way that those with homes often do not."

Most people don't enter the encampments of the poor to find beauty and truth, but Marin saw extraordinary examples of what he calls "moral beauty" in the lives of cast-aside people in hobo jungles.

A sort of moral inventory emerged when he began reflecting on a list of what he has most loved in his lifetime: The Freedom Riders of the segregated South, the generosity of men in hobo jungles, the resistance of Rosa Parks, unarmed and impoverished peasants in Mexico and

See **Finding Moral Beauty** *page 8*

Lawmakers Bludgeon the Food Stamp Program

Democrats joined Republicans in passing a farm bill that cuts food stamps, and locks in huge subsidies for wealthy corporate farmers in perpetuity.

by Lynda Carson



Food Not Bombs serves a meal at People's Park. Food stamps are being cut severely even as hunger is increasing. Lydia Gans photo

Final passage of the $956 billion farm bill received bipartisan support in the Senate on February 4, and soon afterwards, President Barack Obama signed the bill into law. The passage of the bill includes massive cuts to the food stamp program (Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program) that will affect about 47 million people living in poverty across the nation. Food stamp recipients will receive 90 dollars less per month when the cuts take effect, and in California alone, some 700,000 people in poverty will see their benefits shrink.

The major focus on inequality by President Obama and the Democratic Party during the recent State of the Union address turned out to be short-lived, and laughable. Especially when considering that within a week of the address, the Democrats happily joined the Republicans in passing the huge farm bill that bludgeons the food stamp program, while at the same time locking in massive subsidies for wealthy corporate farmers in perpetuity.

Incredibly, in addition to the nearly $9 billion in new cuts to the food stamp program during the next decade, the farm bill includes language that makes it unlawful to use advertisements to let the poor know that the food stamp program even exists.

This is extremely bad news for poor people in Oakland who are already trying to figure out where their next meal is coming from. Based on the latest census report, Oakland has the highest poverty rate for children in the Bay Area, with more than 27 percent residing in households earning less than $23,000 annually.

With nearly $11 billion in cuts to the food stamp program already in the pipeline, the additional $8.7 billion in cuts during the next decade will make life very difficult for people living in poverty.

The five-year farm bill known as the Agriculture Act of 2014 was passed in the House and the Senate with bipartisan support. The bill states, "No funds authorized to be appropriated under this Act shall be used by the Secretary of Agriculture for recruitment activities designed to persuade an individual to apply for supplemental nutrition assistance program benefits (food stamps)."

Imagine that! During an enlightened age when Viagra is advertised on primetime TV for men who are having trouble getting an erection, the honorable members of Congress decided to pass new legislation that forbids the Department of Agriculture from using advertisements to advise poor people that they may be eligible to join the food stamp program.

Senator Dick Durbin, D-Illinois, charged that many poor people receiving benefits from the food stamp program may be involved in fraud. Durbin said, "We think we have tightened it up so it will not affect the payments to those who are truly eligible and those who need the help, and yet it will make sure the taxpayers are treated fairly as well."

Debbie Stabenow, D-Michigan, Senate Agriculture Committee Chairwoman and principal negotiator of the bill, said, "This is a new kind of farm bill designed to meet new challenges of a changing world. We are also making major reforms, eliminating unnecessary and unjustified programs to cut government spending and to increase the integrity of farm programs."

People in the East Bay are already speaking up in support of those living in poverty, and in total disagreement with what many of the Democrats have to say.

Eleanor Walden, a former Berkeley Rent Board Commissioner, said, "This is absolutely deplorable. When I was younger, very poor and was raising my family, the food stamp program was the only program available that made it possible to feed my family."

Lydia Gans, a founding member of East Bay Food Not Bombs, said, "We have to do something about this. We have already seen more and more people coming to our meals because of food insecurity. Many of the people we serve are homeless veterans, and clearly many of them are not receiving the services they need. The cuts to the food stamp program are only going to make matters worse for everyone living in poverty."

According to Gans, Food Not Bombs serves food to around 100 people a day in the East Bay five days a week, and serves nearly as many people on Sundays.

Lori Kossowsky said, "I used food stamps a very long time ago when I got out of college and was in an internship. I had help staying in a house thanks to a friend of mine, but I did not have any food to eat during the internship. The food stamp program helped keep me alive until I could eventually find some work."



Berkeley volunteers respond to the crisis of hunger and malnutrition. Lydia Gans photo

A major split in the progressive community occurred recently in the battle over food stamps when the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP), a left-wing policy group, supported the Democrats who are in favor of massive cuts to the food stamp program. Last year, the same kind of split occurred in the progressive community when CBPP and other so-called progressive groups supported rental reforms, and cuts to the housing subsidies of poor people in the nation's federal housing programs.

To contact Lynda Carson, send an email to tenantsrule@yahoo.com

Buried Deeply Under the Rubble

by Janny Castillo

YouTube has videos about miracles. I saw one recently. It was about an infant in Syria found buried deeply in the rubble of a building that collapsed after a blast.

The men, the child's rescuers — sometimes four, sometimes as many as six — hear a small cry from a hole completely covered with gravel, very much underground. They begin to dig frantically with their hands to reach the child. They shout for the child to speak out, so they can better determine where to dig.

They dig, they shout, they dig more, they shout even louder, and twice I hear a cry from under the ground.

But where?

Where was the baby? There is no evidence of a structure, only rubble, and the more they dig, they only find more rubble. How can anyone, much less a child, be alive under there?

They dig some more. It was a long time before I see a sleeve. A red sleeve. The rescuers begin screaming desperately, digging away the small stones and gravel. A small hand appears, a baby's hand.

Unbelievable, I thought. Unbelievable.

Many hands dig and dig, frantically yelling to each other, and to the baby. I couldn't understand a word they were saying, but I thought it must have been, "Hold on, we are coming, hold on."

Finally, a small dusty head appears. A baby, maybe six to nine months old, a perfect coating of dust in his eyes and on his face, not moving, perfectly still. I think the unthinkable — that they found him but it was too late.

The men keep digging around the baby, uncovering more and more of his body.

Finally, I see the baby's head flop back and his eyes open. Then I see him lift his hand to wipe the dust from his eyes. Several of the men try to help him. They wipe his little chubby face. The baby lifts his arm again and wipes. Two of the men help him wipe the dust and pat him on the chest to help him breath.

And still they dig. And there is still much yelling going on. Frantic, desperate to get him out. He is only halfway out now. The torso and his legs are wedged deep into the ground.

At one point, a metal bar is needed to move a stubborn piece of concrete. The rescuer gently covers the baby to protect him. The bottom half of the baby is hard to get out, so wedged in he is.

His rescuers do not give up.

Finally, with many screams of joy, one man lifts the baby free into the arms of another that holds him really close.

Amazing, I thought. That a baby could survive under rubble, buried deep in the ground. That he cried and someone heard him. That they found him and were able to save him. That he lived. Amazing.

Then I thought....

What if Poverty is rubble and many people are buried deep under it? What if they cried but no one heard, and no one came to rescue them?

It feels like that, sometimes. Like there is no way out, not enough money, not enough food, but plenty of despair, hurt, loneliness — and so little help.

Being buried deep under Poverty can feel like being buried under rubble.

OK, I say. There are plenty of people with me. Plenty of people, who if no one comes to rescue us. Hell! We'll just dig ourselves out.

Janny Castillo is Hope and Justice Coordinator at St. Mary's Center. Email: santana400@aol.com

Renewing the Struggle for Civil Rights

The planet is speaking and too few are listening. The poor are weeping and too few are concerned. The despised and rejected of men are incarcerated, detained and deported.

by Brian K. Woodson, Sr.

The fight for civil rights in the middle of the 20th century was not an American invention, nor was it the preoccupation of domestic leaders alone. It was a worldwide phenomenon with an American manifestation.

Even in the United States, it was multi-dimensional, with layers of language, experience and expressions too vast and complex to unravel with any depth in the precious few sentences of this article. Even with all the books that have been written and the records that have been revealed, we must be wise enough to know that there is still so much that we do not know.

Billie Holiday's famous mournful anthem, "Strange Fruit," reminded us that "Southern trees bear strange fruit, blood on the leaves and blood at the root..." And the countless martyrs whose stories will never be told are also integral parts of the movement for freedom that history records as the Civil Rights movement.

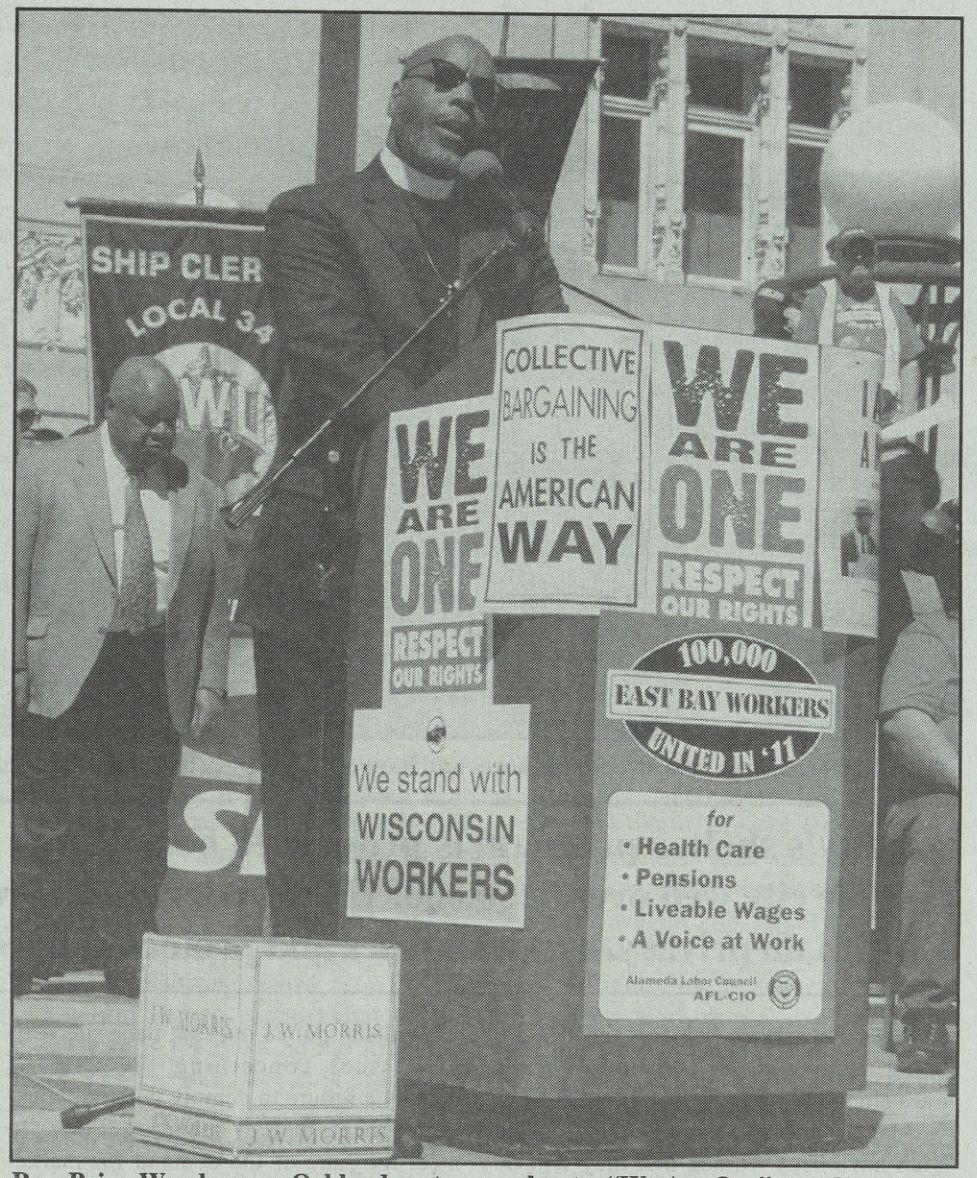
There are many tributaries and streams to the river that became mighty enough to change the face of American society. If there were only one lesson to be garnered from the experience it would be that the oppressed, beleaguered and subjugated will only be delivered from the abuses of injustice when they themselves rise up to fight for justice.

Now, it is true that change is inevitable and constant, but progressive, positive change that effectively confronts injustice and inequities is no simple or evolutionary thing. It requires courage, tenacity, wisdom, luck and a whole lot of other factors introduced by the Divine at the precise time and right moment. There are no guarantees of success that can be bought, sold, reasoned or otherwise procured.

Those who would challenge injustice and fight for moral progress in an immoral context do so at their own peril. Still, history suggests that there is no other option for actual human sociological advancement. And so let us engage to continue the process of progress.

I don't know if there is a place where "we the people" can go to have unmonitored, unauthorized conversations about the state. I am not sure that there is a place that the dissidents can gather to dispute, disagree and discuss. But I do know that the creation of such a place is vital if we are to survive.

I do believe with all my heart that the paradigm of extant power must change in progressive and sustainable directions if there is any hope for human survival on this blue marble sailing through the universe. And if that conversation is to be engaged, there is no better place than here and no better time then now.



Rev. Brian Woodson, an Oakland pastor, speaks at a "We Are One" rally organized by the Alameda Labor Council at Oakland City Hall. Photo: Brook Anderson

VILIFIED IN LIFE, IDOLIZED IN DEATH

Now, considering the struggle for Civil Rights in America, perhaps the first person that comes to mind is the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Dr. King is the icon of the American Civil Rights movement for many reasons. Some of them you may find just and others unjust. I believe he stands as the icon of American Civil Rights largely because he no longer can speak his mind or move his body. It is entirely but not exclusively an American phenomenon to idealize, then idolize in death, the one you vilified in life.

The Kingian principles, ethos and praxis are essential if we are to progress in society. If we are to critique empire and engage in the building up of a beloved community, more and more of us must embrace and understand the movement over which King stands iconically.

My thoughts are not intended to diminish King at all but to contextualize him. For there is a danger of messianic hope if the only solution as seen in the kinds of misguided hopes placed on the Obama election, followed by a largely uncritical view of his presidency.

For this reason, it is important to understand that King was not alone in building the Civil Rights movement, and more importantly, it is vital to suggest what a comparable movement would look like in the present. For we must bring the Kingian principles from the shadowed, dusty past to the relevant present.

The hammer of hatred and inhumanity is as real today as it was in the mid-20th century. If there is to be any hope, it is in the Fannie Lou Hamers, Bayard Rustins, Clay Evans, JoElla Stevensons — and all those who gave their life energy to changing this nation, but will never be honored with a statue or a book. Those whose names will forever remain uncelebrated but without which you and I would be lynched or enslaved for the thoughts we share and the lives we live.

MCDONALD'S AND MLK

The teenagers and children who are growing up today are being presented with a view of the Civil Rights movement distorted by the MLK of McDonald commercials. They must come to understand that there is more to what happened than they are being shown. The uncritical young adults who accept the government and corporations recording and inspecting their every thought, purchase and movement, must open their eyes to see the full extent of oppression and injustice.

The poor and working class, the homeless and near-homeless citizens of these United States are in dire straits and desperate need of a movement similar to the one whose symbol is Martin Luther King Jr. But no such movement will occur if our time is consumed looking for a Martin instead of working for a movement.

America has a penchant to forget and then manufacture history in ways that suit myths of her righteousness. But please understand that the Rev. Dr. Martin King modern American mythmakers wish us to see is not the Rev. King American mythmakers saw at the time.

Prayer: Dear Lord Jesus it comes to me to speak again and I wish to do so on your behalf and at your behest. Empower my thoughts, enliven my words, breathe life into the moments these words are read or heard that the very world might change in honor and deference to your majesty.
— Rev. Brian K. Woodson

Today they wish us to see someone whose hopes and dreams would have been realized in the election of the first president with African blood. They wish us to see a Dr. King who would be elated to see our integrated schools and buses. A Rev. King who would rejoice at the interracial marriages and black pro quarterbacks and television superstars. That is the Martin they wish you to see towering over the mall in our nation's capital.

They want you to believe that the "I Have A Dream" speech epitomized these values and ranks with the greatest oratory of our nation. That is the Martin the American image-makers want you to see and believe they saw. But it wasn't.

THE HATRED OF HOOVER

FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover hated the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Historians say that Hoover was obsessed with him. Hoover thought Martin was the most dangerous man in America. He accused King of being a communist and had him followed and wiretapped and who knows what else. The FBI devoted more of its resources to the surveillance, disruption, persecution and destruction of Martin King than it did to anything or anyone else.

Neither the Kennedy nor Johnson administration liked Dr. King. But both opened the White House doors because Dr. King and the movement left them no other tenable option. The American brand of democracy was on trial and the whole world was watching.

The cruel and unjust antipathy which blacks suffered every day could no longer be hidden and ignored. America's windows were wide open and the world was watching as Bull Connor's dogs bit innocent children and church leaders in Birmingham, and as Alabama Gov. George Wallace vowed "segregation forever," and a thousand other examples of American evil were being exposed.

The King America wants us to see now wasn't the King they saw then. Further,

See **Renewed Civil Rights Struggle** *page 5*

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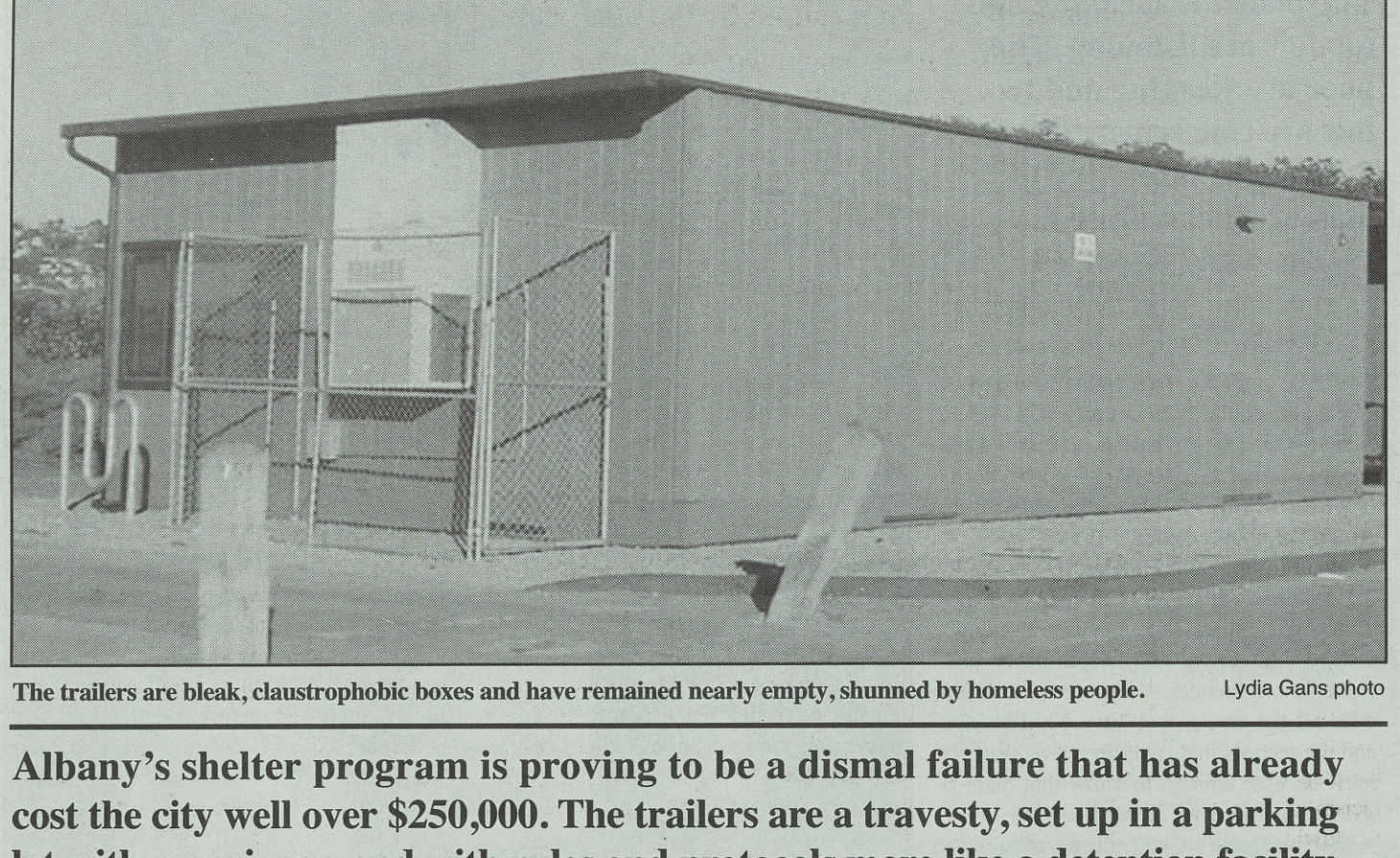
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Albany's Shelter Program Is a Dismal Failure

by Lydia Gans



The trailers are bleak, claustrophobic boxes and have remained nearly empty, shunned by homeless people. Lydia Gans photo

Albany's shelter program is proving to be a dismal failure that has already cost the city well over $250,000. The trailers are a travesty, set up in a parking lot with no privacy, and with rules and protocols more like a detention facility.

Hidden away from Albany's streets, separated from the city by the freeway, is an area where nature and people have been allowed to flourish for years. The Albany Waterfront Trail leads off from the end of Buchanan Street over an area aptly named the Plateau, along a narrow Neck and ending on the Albany Bulb, a bulb-shaped landfill that was created from construction debris and landscaping materials.

The Albany Bulb lies at the heart of this story. Back in the 1990s, people who were homeless created an encampment on the Plateau and the Bulb. Then, in 1999, Albany city officials noticed them and proceeded to clear the area.

They ordered police to raid the encampment, dismantled all the tents and shacks, and evicted the campers. City officials paid a nonprofit agency to set up a temporary shelter in a couple of trailers, but did nothing to provide permanent housing for the people made homeless.

Albany officials brought in bulldozers and heavy equipment and tore down broad swaths of the vegetation and dumpstered all the campers' belongings.

After this mass eviction, the police patrolled the area from time to time, but soon everything went back to normal. Homeless people returned and settled on the Bulb, for they had nowhere else to go in a city that has refused to build housing or shelters for their homeless citizens for the last 20 years. People continued to walk their dogs and enjoy the art created by the campers and their friends.

Now it's all happening again, this time on a much broader scale. In the summer of 2013, Albany began the process of transferring the entire area to East Bay *Regional Park District (EBRPD). Signs* were posted listing rules and regulations for what is now Albany Waterfront Park.

All the wild vegetation on the Plateau has been removed, presumably to be replaced by something appropriate, though in view of the drought conditions, who knows when it will become green again. The upper trail to the Bulb is being widened for service vehicles, bushes are being chopped down and limbs cut off trees along the way.

And the people who are living on the Bulb have been warned that they will be evicted. Camping is not allowed in state parks. The homes they have built for themselves are being demolished.

The City contracted with Operation Dignity to provide temporary shelter for six months. City officials offered nothing *beyond that, even though Albany has no* homeless shelter and no housing for very low-income people. There will be nowhere for the evicted campers to go.

"It's illegal to be homeless in Albany," longtime camper and spokesperson Amber Whitson comments wryly. "It's the leaf blower effect. Blowing problems onto somebody else's sidewalk."

Whitson points out that there are serious issues concerning the City of Albany's failure to comply with the housing element, the law requiring a city "to meet its share of the demand for market rate and affordable housing in the region." Housing advocates have filed suit against Albany officials to demand compliance.

Lawyers for the campers filed a second lawsuit asserting that the shelter violates the Americans with Disabilities Act *which requires accessibility for people* with disabilities. That litigation is still going on.

City officials brought in the Berkeley Food and Housing Project (BFHP) to help the campers find housing and connect with social and community services. They call the program "Outreach and Engagement." That program is proving to be a dismal failure. And all this has already cost the city well over $250,000.

The shelter consists of two trailers, toilets, showers, dog kennel and a structure housing a generator, and is set up at the entrance to the parking lot. The trailers are a travesty, with no privacy, with rules and protocols more like a detention facility. The shelters are only open at night, and are closed throughout the entire day.

"They're horrendously abusive there," Amber Whitson says.

In reporting on this story, I tried three different times to speak with the shelter managers, but they refused to speak to me. Instead, I was told to talk to city officials.

It is hardly surprising that generally only two or three people have been stay-

See **Albany Shelter Program** *page 15*

Albany Officials Ignore the Needs of the Disabled

by Amber Whitson



Amber Whitson has lived at the Albany Bulb since 2006. She has done extensive clean-up, trash removal and natural restoration at the landfill. Lydia Gans photo

The Albany Bulb has been home to a population of otherwise homeless individuals for more than 20 years. I have been a resident of the Bulb for seven-plus years.

The City of Albany has had the land that we live on earmarked for incorporation into the state parks system for 30 years. However, as the City has never actually made any effort to "prepare" the land for the transfer (as is required), a community has formed on the Albany Bulb where people are free from the usual harassment that homeless people typically endure while living on the streets.

Virtually all of us who live on the Albany Landfill fit the HUD definition of "chronically homeless." Some members of our community are terminally ill. Not a single one of us has an income that exceeds $1,200 per month. I am personally a recipient of SSI, based on various physical and mental disabilities.

Albany has never treated its homeless residents as if we had any rights. Indeed, with the exception of the occasions when one of the City's attempts to displace us is being held at bay by civil rights lawyers, Albany prefers to act as if we don't even exist. Recently, Albany officials have again decided to take action to displace us from our longtime homes.

City officials set up two trailers in the parking lot at the Albany Bulb and declared them to be the "Albany Temporary Transition Shelter," in response to public outrage at the fact that Albany has no permanent homeless shelter and was about to evict 90 percent of its homeless population — with nowhere else for us to go except the next town over.

Albany officials had been repeatedly told, by numerous individuals and on multiple occasions, about the high percentage of disabled individuals living on the Albany Bulb. Many Bulb residents suffer from various, complicated mental and emotional issues, including PTSD, major depression, schizoid personality disorder and severe anxiety. Some of those same people, and others, suffer from Hepatitis C, HIV and other physical disabilities. Also, two residents of the Albany Bulb currently are pregnant.

Albany built the Temporary Shelter with the intention of pressuring residents of the Albany Bulb to move out of our homes on the Bulb and into the shelter.

Yet, the shelter was designed and constructed to be very much like an institution. As a result, many Bulb residents (who have experienced incarceration throughout their lives, instead of receiving the appropriate treatment that they each needed) feel that the shelter is a very threatening atmosphere. Also, there are no services at the shelter, whatsoever.

The shelter is staffed by an organization called Operation Dignity. Operation Dignity's shelter staff have freely admitted that they are "not trained in anything" and this is evident in their incredibly offensive and hostile treatment of both actual and prospective clients.

I stopped by the shelter on the day that it opened and asked Alex McElree, the director of Operation Dignity, if the shelter was willing to accommodate the service animals of Bulb residents (as we have two certified service dogs currently living with their people on the Bulb). His answer was that there were four kennels

See **Albany Ignores Disabled** *page 15*

Renewed Civil Rights Struggle

The Guantanamo gulag still exists. Drone warfare continues unabated. The economic devastation caused by the uber-rich and paid for by the struggling poor has morphed into more riches for the already rich and more poverty everywhere.



In 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. displays a poster for the Poor People's Campaign led by SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference). AP photo: Horace Cort

from page 3

Martin wasn't loved and accepted by all blacks, and all except a few Americans of European descent rejected him. Many African Americans as well as white leaders in the Christian church shunned association with Dr. King and declared his ethos, tactics and theology inappropriate, unwarranted and wrong.

But King was not alone. It must be understood when one looks to the past that the very world at the time was in motion. Africa, in particular, was alive with the energy and action that threw off the colonial subjugation of European powers.

The world itself was undergoing drastic change in that era. Global contests questioning the validity of power and political construct were alive and engaged all over the planet. Colonialism, with all its abuses, racism and violence, was being challenged worldwide. The melanin-kissed people of Africa led the world in throwing off the shackles of European domination. The British, French and Belgian powers strained and were capitulating.

Democracy was on trial and its counter, Communism, sat at the prosecutor's desk calling witness after witness to the bar of world opinion.

MARTIN WAS NOT ALONE

Martin was not alone. The Southern Christian Leadership Conference, which he led, and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee were not the only voices in the struggle.

The streets of America were alive with critique and Martin Luther King Jr. was not the only voice of dissent. James R. Lawson of the United African Nationalist Movement, Roy Wilkins of the NAACP, and Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam were very popular voices in the struggle for alternatives to the violent racist oppression in America.

Everyone knows of segregation's water fountains, lunch counters and bus stations, but what fueled the rebellion was not so frivolous as these vanities would suggest. The whole of the American ethos, history and praxis was exposed and threatened.

The continued rape of our women, subjugation of our humanity, mis-education of our progeny, theft of our labor and false fabrication of our history were on trail. America had been weighed in the balance and been found wanting.

Meanwhile, white racists continued to beat, bomb and batter Blacks at whim and will. White supremacists lied, libeled and lynched us and Blacks were rising up in defense of their lives and deference to their own people.

Martin was not alone and the American political system was not on trial alone. Christianity was also on trial. It was seen as the White man's religion. It was labeled a slave religion. Christian clergy were seen more as part of the problem than part of the solution.

And into this cauldron of chaos and change Martin was thrown. We know of the speeches of Dr. King. We can hear his voice online, in the media and in our minds, but there were other voices. They were loud and vociferous at the time. Like the voice of John Davis preaching Black Nationalism in Harlem on the corner of 125th Street and 7th Avenue in front of the Teresa Hotel, or the voice of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad declaring that the white man was the devil personified and that by 1970 the war against the devil will have been waged and won.

There were other voices as well, some of which were chronicled by Mike Wallace and Louis Lomax in their television production entitled "The Hate That Hate Produced."

The option offered to the love and peace that Martin King espoused was retributive hatred and violence. Still, the options with which change would most quickly and surely come must never be exchanged with the common change that was sought; namely human dignity, opportunity and respect for the poor and working women and men of America and the world.

The reality of the Civil Rights Movement is now a chapter in American history. The statue of Martin King stands peering over the Washington Mall as a suggestion that we believe that America has changed and now accepts him. But it must also stand to remind us not of whom we are told to believe he was, but to remember that the work he was a part of remains woefully unfinished.

I would like to suggest that, at the moment, it is too quiet on the American Front. The lens of history is of little use if it is not used to focus and interpret the present. And it is only right readings of the present that future histories will recognize as valid. It falls to us to address the question of our age and engage the struggle of our time.

OBAMA WAS NEVER A KING

And although I believe that Barack Obama is an American avatar, I do not look to him — nor should you — for the solutions to the deep problems within or without our country and experience. Now, five years into his administration, the truth of American intransigence is plain to see and open for inspection. Obama was never a Martin King, except in the sense that mythmakers wish us to see him as such.

Under his presidency, much of the excesses and abominations of the Bush administrations prevail. He has deported millions and millions of people, thereby destroying families and increasing the fragility of our social construct. The Guantanamo gulag still exists. Drone warfare, emblematic of American imperialism, continues unabated. The economic devastation caused by the uber-rich and paid for by the struggling poor has morphed into more riches for the already rich and a proliferation of poverty in America and all over the planet.

Perhaps Barack Obama would be as good a president as he seems a man were it not for the incessant attacks and demonization he suffers at the hands of a ubiquitous and militant right-wing media. Still, his policies, if given half a chance, would only be moderate modifications to the American Imperial mess. And this we will never know, because anything he says or suggests is met with the most virulent torrent of disguised hatred.

Ever since Ronald Reagan fired the Air Traffic Controllers soon after his fabricated election... (Let me take a sidebar at this point. I hope you do not believe that the fabrication of elections began with the 2000 coup d'etat when the Bushes stole Florida from the Floridians and Ohio from the Buckeyes. I hope you understand that to this very minute there is no verifiable means of certifying an election in the United States. We can electronically bank with security and confidence, but there is neither security nor reliability in the American voting process. Democracy cannot exist without free and fair elections, yet there is little reason to have confidence in the electoral process. To have free and fair elections would result in the majority ruling and elevate the voice of the poor to audibility — and America has always preferred otherwise.)

Since Ronald Reagan fired the Air Traffic Controllers soon after his fabricated election, a war on the civil rights gains has been waged and largely won. The reach of the NSA, CIA, FBI and their corporate clients into our lives, thoughts, computers and phone conversations would make J. Edgar Hoover blush.

The incarceration rates and the evolution of the prison-industrial complex have replaced conversations about classroom diversity and equity with the urgent need to combat a school-to-prison pipeline.

Carter G. Woodson stated that; "When you control a man's thinking you do not have to worry about his actions." And should we examine the actions of our youth, young adults or even our own actions, we would blush at the utter lack of critical historical reflection alive today. We are lost in a sea of individualism, adrift in an ocean of information, clutching the broken boards from the ship of our humanity. We are drowning in the putrid waters of personal identity and individualized worldviews.

OUR COMMON HUMANITY

If Noah saved the world two by two, we are destroying it one by one with the preoccupation of our personal identity and desires. What this America needs is not another dozen self-actualized, encouraged individuals, or even another million such people. What is vital to our survival and critical for the continuance of our culture is to understand our common humanity and mutual destiny.

This is what King declared. There is little profit in examining the flaws, failures and future of Civil Rights in America if we are forced to view it through the false frame of a historical myth.

One can simply consider the views surrounding Edward Snowden and Julian Assange to assess where one is in the civil rights conversations of today. Yes the rights of LBGT populations to marriage and full acceptance are valid, but I would argue that they are merely the water fountains, lunch counters and bus stations of our day. The challenge now, as it was then, is bigger than that.

Today we must engage a critique and confrontation over the aggregate wealth of the planet measured in access to and corruption of resources, as well as the naked opulence of the uber-rich.

For any who would look, the perils on humanity's horizon are plain to see. From the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains to the Western face of the Alleghenys, America has become a sea stained with the decaying waste of a decomposed industrial age. Her factories, once alive with the clanking grind of subduing the earth, now languish and rust in the still silence of death. The workers who once fed her coal and sweat in order to feed their families now sit idle and hungry.

American farms which once fed the world are parched with drought and then flash-flooded by a climate hell-bent on retaliatory strikes. Her crops are soiled with genetically modified organisms in experiments that would have made Dr. Frankenstein blush.

THE FATAL FLAW IN AMERICA — PREFERENCE FOR THE RICH

There has always been a fatal flaw in the design of America — in the very idea of America. This flaw is embedded in its Constitution and its very Declaration of Independence. This flaw has been the midwife of all our laws, it is the mother of our slavery and the father of our racism.

This flaw is the obscene, unbridled deference to and preference for the rich. It is an unsustainable paradox; one cannot extol the virtue of the rapist. The uber-rich and the *policies they espouse must be exposed that* all can see the darkness they promote. It is time to have a conversation about *maximum* wages. It is time to proportionally link the minimum wage to the maximum wage and thereby begin the process of rationalizing the notion of work and embrace the substantive equality of all humanity.

There is a further challenge. The age in which we exist has produced an idolization of information, as if data was determinative. Information does not necessarily inform. Decisions as well as destinies are determined by the state and size of one's heart and not by the data at one's disposal. Individualism and the religion of information are the dark forces at play in our world. They are the twin demons deluding us into the trance of our destruction.

The planet is speaking and too few are listening. The poor are weeping and too few are concerned. The despised and rejected of men are incarcerated, detained and deported.

There is no doubt as to whose interests are served by our lethargy. We must take up the struggle of our age with the tactics of our history. We must engage to insure that the Commonwealth is employed for the Common Good. If becoming involves the pain of being, and being requires the practice of community, then the duty of our time is laid bare before us. We must turn our hearts, hands and help to the poor, huddled masses yearning to be free.

Like the Christ of the Gospels, we must preach the news of alternative economic possibilities, heal the hopes of those who no longer believe, empower paradigms of powerlessness, and release the unjustly incarcerated. The Bible declares this to be the acceptable work of the Lord. I would suggest that the Lord has no other hands to do this work but our own.

Rev. Brian Woodson is an Oakland pastor and a staff organizer with EBASE, East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy.

Building a New Movement for Full Employment

by Wade Lee Hudson

Two-thirds of the American people agree. As a society, we "ought to see to it that everyone who wants to work can find a job."

Most Americans also believe the minimum wage should be high enough to enable workers to avoid poverty. We know how to guarantee every worker a living-wage job opportunity. We can do it easily. There is no good reason not to do it.

When we secure living-wage job opportunities for all, everyone will benefit. The positive effects will ripple throughout society. Business owners will benefit from a more prosperous economy. Most workers will benefit from higher wages, because employers will pay more to keep trained employees. Many workers will be treated with more respect by employers, because workers will have more choices.

People currently living in poverty will lift themselves out of poverty, and everyone will benefit from living in a more harmonious, safer society. We can take better care of the environment without worrying about its impact on the economy.

It's hard to imagine any quickly achievable reform that would be more beneficial. To gain that goal, we need to build the embryonic full employment movement. The seeds of that movement have already been planted. Now we need to grow it and develop the grassroots pressure that is needed to be successful.

A full employment movement could be based on the following principles.

A Broad Alliance

Assuring a living-wage job opportunity is a policy embraced by individuals with widely different political views because it is a principle that blends valid beliefs *from varied perspectives.*

We can achieve full employment **without increasing the size of the federal government.** Rather, the federal government can send money to local governments (where citizens have more impact) to hire public-service workers to meet pressing social and environmental needs.

Full employment can be achieved **primarily by creating private-sector jobs.** Initial funding of public-service jobs will increase consumer demand, which will boost the economy. Then, in the upward spiral that follows, private businesses will steadily hire more workers.

We can create the needed jobs **without increasing the deficit**. A small tax on unproductive, dangerous Wall Street speculation can generate the money needed to jump-start a federally funded jobs program. Thereafter, we can hire more workers with increased revenues resulting from a stronger economy, as well as savings from reduced spending on unemployment insurance and food stamps.

We can't guarantee a job, but we can guarantee a job *opportunity* **without increasing dependency on the government.** Some will choose not to work and others won't show up on time and work hard (and will be fired). But those individuals are few, and they can make it on their own or with other sources of support.

Full employment can be created **without creating "make work" jobs.** Almost everyone wants to work and has some useful skill. We can hire the unemployed and give them on-the-job training if needed to rebuild our infrastructure and meet neglected social and environmental needs. They can provide after-school recreation, make park improvements, help clean up the environment, and serve as nursing home staff, in-home caregivers, teacher aides, and substance abuse counselors.

Some ideologues always attack capitalism and promote government programs. Others always attack the government and promote capitalism. But most Americans recognize that we need **a mixed economy**, with both a strong government and a vigorous free market. Sending federal money to hire workers to meet needs that the private sector cannot meet (because there's no profit in it) is an example of the common sense pragmatism we need.



The corner of Wall Street and Broadway in New York City. Photo credit: Fletcher6

The federal government has a moral obligation to step up and provide the necessary funds for living-wage jobs. If the government can figure out how to rescue Wall Street, they can figure out how to rescue Main Street.

Compassion

Most individuals could do more to improve their situation. Self-improvement is valuable and needs to be supported. But if every unemployed person redoubled their efforts to become more employable, there still wouldn't be enough jobs to go around. And most people can't start a new business on their own.

The jobs market is like a game of musical chairs. So long as there aren't enough jobs, workers are going to be unjustifiably unemployed.

Some people believe that unskilled workers 18 or over don't deserve a living wage (current law establishes a "youth minimum wage" that treats 16- and 17-year-old workers differently). They say these workers need to gain experience and boost their skills before they can expect to earn more. And some believe that being forced to work at poverty-level wages and face the threat of homelessness serves to motivate people to strengthen their skills.

But opening this door is dangerous. Once opened, it can easily be opened ever wider — as is happening now with our shrinking middle class. And even with a minimal living wage, most workers will still be motivated to improve their situation by enhancing their skills.

Every adult who holds down a job should earn enough to make ends meet at a minimally decent level. No human being should be considered disposable and lose the freedom to fulfill their potential. Moreover, the threat of poverty constrains everyone's liberty, if only because when we see others being oppressed and we have a heart, we are compelled to try to help eliminate that oppression. So long as one of us is not free, none of us are free.

We don't like to see homeless people and beggars on the street. It gnaws at our conscience, making us wonder whether we should be doing more to help. But let's not relieve our conscience by blaming the victims of our economy and yelling, "Go get a job." With Jesus, let's love our neighbor as we love ourselves. With Buddha, let's avoid both self-sacrifice and selfishness.

Focus on Morality

Securing the human right to a living-wage job opportunity is a moral imperative. Achieving that goal should be the fundamental purpose of our economy.

If even one person can't find a living-wage job quickly, it is a moral outrage. Activists in the full employment movement need to hammer home that message consistently. Most Americans are moral people. They want to do what is right. Let's tap our deep moral sense and encourage one another to fulfill our true nature as compassionate human beings.

It's easy to get wrapped in up facts, figures, history, policy debates, and speculations about the future. But the eyes of most people glaze over when confronted with all those statistics and theoretical arguments.

Let's focus instead on the moral issue. We are obligated as a human community to make sure that every adult among us who is able and willing to work has the opportunity to earn enough to make ends meet at a minimally decent level.

Let's build strong, clear support for that position and persuade those with the ability to do so to achieve that goal. We don't have to agree on exactly how to do it. What we ordinary people need to do is monitor whether or not our society has secured for everyone the human right to a living-wage job opportunity. Until they do, we need to keep pressuring key decision-makers to do it.

Perhaps our nation will experience a moral renewal that will prompt businesses that are already highly profitable to pay higher wages. Perhaps the wealthy will decide to donate 10 percent of their wealth to nonprofit organizations to hire public-service workers. Perhaps the economy will grow to the point that anyone can find a living-wage job.

But until some miracle like that happens, the federal government has a moral obligation to step up and provide the necessary funds. We need to focus on that moral issue like a laser beam. If the government can figure out how to rescue Wall Street, they can figure out how to rescue Main Street.

Build the Base

Those of us who are committed to this goal already have a great deal of support. In March 2013, based on a study funded by the highly reputable Russell Sage Foundation, three respected political scientists, Benjamin I. Page, Larry M. Bartels, and Jason Seawright, reported that two-thirds of the American people believe "the government in Washington ought to see to it that everyone who wants to work can find a job."

The wording in that survey is important. As have other surveys, it did not ask people if they support a guaranteed job. Rather, it used the phrase "can find a job." As discussed above, that formulation implies assuring a job opportunity. It does not assume that people who find a job can keep it regardless of their effort. It does not guarantee a job unconditionally.

Polls indicate the importance of the distinction. The Page/Bartels/Seawright study found lower support for "the federal government should provide jobs for everyone able and willing to work who cannot find a job in private employment." Barely more than half supported that position.

A 2014 YouGov/Huffington Post poll asked, "Would you favor or oppose a law guaranteeing a job to every American adult, with the government providing jobs for people who can't find employment in the private sector?" In that poll, more people supported that proposition, 47 percent, than opposed it, 41 percent. But support for each of these positions was weaker than with the "job opportunity" option.

Various methods are available to create jobs, including providing more support for the private economy. But according to most Americans, the ultimate responsibility rests in the government in Washington, D.C. Other polls have shown strong support for federal job creation programs. A March 2013 Gallup poll, for example, found that three-fourths supported "a federal jobs creation law that would spend government money for a program designed to create more than 1 million new jobs."

The Page/Bartels/Seawright study also found that three-fourths of the public believe the minimum wage should be "high enough so that no family with a full-time worker falls below [the] official poverty line." That response indicates that an overwhelming majority of Americans believes that full-time workers should earn a "living wage" that enables them to avoid poverty.

Different elements of a full employment movement could back various proposals for increasing the minimum wage. One option is to raise the minimum wage to a level that will enable single workers to avoid poverty and increase the Earned Income Tax credit for families to achieve the same goal.

A recent poll conducted by Hart Research Associates found 80 percent of the respondents agreed that the minimum wage should be raised to $10.10 an hour. A national meeting in Washington on April 28, 2014, will be pushing for a $15 per hour minimum wage.

Through vigorous public debate, we can develop a consensus about how to concretely ensure living-wage incomes, while at the same time building support for the proposition that as a society, one

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The Movement for Full Employment



We need a new movement for full employment and living wages. Roger Blackwell photo

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way or the other, we must assure everyone a living-wage job opportunity.

We would not need total agreement within a full employment movement on all specific methods. Rather, we can respect our differences and focus on building broad support for our basic goal: guaranteeing all Americans a living-wage job opportunity.

PROMOTE *TRUE* FULL EMPLOYMENT

In recent decades, most economists have mistakenly redefined "full employment" to mean something other than what the term used to mean and what most people understand it to mean — namely, that anyone who wants to work can quickly find a job. Instead, they've tied full employment to a specific rate of unemployment that is supposedly necessary to prevent excessive inflation.

This new definition carries weight, because the economists behind it are highly respected by pundits and politicians who help shape public opinion. These economists define full employment as the "non-accelerating inflation rate of unemployment," or NAIRU. Wikepedia says NAIRU "refers to a level of unemployment below which inflation rises." Investopedia defines it as "the specific level of unemployment that exists in an economy that does not cause inflation to increase."

Thus, by definition, the NAIRU consists of an automatic cause-and-effect relationship between some particular rate of unemployment and inflation. That's why economists give it so much weight. On the face of it, however, this concept is nonsense. There is no such simple cause-and-effect relationship. Reality is far more complicated than that.

The economists themselves can't agree on what that rate of unemployment is. And the most recent official predictions were wrong. Decreasing unemployment rates in the 1990s, for example, did not lead to any insignificant increase in "core inflation," which excludes oil prices. Yet economists still talk about the NAIRU as if it were Gospel truth.

Once you accept that no NAIRU has magical powers and you recognize that other factors are extremely relevant, the only logical conclusion is to accept that, given the political will, we can use measures other than creating unemployment to deal with any inflationary pressures that result from achieving true full employment. The NAIRU therefore is a myth. It does not hold the power it is supposed to have.

This conclusion is reinforced by an analysis of the historical record. For example, age-setting practices in Sweden and Japan maintained a sustainable balance between wage growth and productivity growth into the 1980s.

Rapid worker productivity growth in various countries have restrained wage and price increases. Price controls also have been used to restrain prices, and increased global competition is limiting price increases.

We should also bear in mind that we can fund public-service jobs without increasing the deficit (which can be inflationary). Workers in a federally funded jobs program can remain available to take jobs in the private sector, just as they do when they collect unemployment insurance. Also, the amount of money the federal government sends to each region can be based on that region's unemployment rate: regions with more unemployment can receive more funding. Finally, we can reduce funding for direct job creation as unemployment declines. All these methods will minimize inflationary pressures.

If wages and Social Security keep pace, a modest increase in prices is not problematic (except for Wall Street traders who did not anticipate the increase). The gains from increased employment would be far greater than any potential costs from higher inflation. Even if prices did increase, the rise would be gradual, allowing time for corrective measures, if needed.

Once again, we need not get hung up on trying to reach agreement on exact methods. Rather, we can stay focused on our goal and insist that if and when policy makers at some point in the future consider creating unemployment to restrain inflation, they should do so openly with full public debate.

The NAIRU with its alleged automatic cause-and-effect relationship is blatantly false. There's a good possibility we can achieve full employment without adding to inflationary pressures. Creating unemployment to control inflation should be the absolute last resort.

We should not blindly trust economists (or any other technocrat). They've often been terribly wrong on many important matters in the past. They tend to ignore morality and are too willing to sacrifice the unemployed and working poor on the altar of "economic growth" that fails to lift all boats.

Instead, we should rely primarily on our own common sense and clear logic, and stay grounded in the key moral issue: every adult who is able and willing to work deserves a living-wage job opportunity.

BUILDING THE MOVEMENT

Signs of a contemporary full employment movement have been percolating for decades. New Initiatives for Full Employment (NIFE), an ethnically and racially diverse group of social activists and academics began working together on the East Coast in 1986 to develop a feasible plan for full employment.

From April 1990 to March 1991, the San Francisco-based Solutions to Poverty Workshop developed a concrete 10-point National Program to Abolish Involuntary Poverty. The San Francisco Antipoverty Congress adopted that program in April 1992, which led to the formation of the Campaign to Abolish Poverty (CAP) and the introduction of the Living Wage Jobs for All Act by Congressman Ron Dellums.

In June 1994, NIFE convened the National Jobs for All Coalition, which was committed to building a new movement for full employment at livable wages.

In the summer of 1994, an alliance of labor and religious organizations in Baltimore began organizing for a local living-wage ordinance, which was adopted in December. In March 1995, the Campaign for Sustainable Milwaukee launched its campaign for a living-wage law using Baltimore as a model. In the fall of 1995, Chicago initiated its successful, similar effort.

In 1996, the Full Employment Coalition convened a Jobs for All Week, began organizing for a living-wage law in San Francisco, and supported similar efforts in other cities. Scores of cities and counties throughout the country now have living-wage laws.

More than 130,000 individuals have signed the "OUR Walmart" petition asking President Obama to support Walmart workers who are risking their livelihood by organizing fellow workers.

Fast-food workers organizing with Restaurant Opportunities Centers to increase the minimum wage are asking consumers to sign a petition declaring, "I am willing to pay an extra dime a day for my food so that close to 8 million food system workers and 21 million additional low-wage workers can receive a much deserved raise to help them meet their basic needs."

In 2013, Congressman John Conyers, Jr. introduced HR 1000, the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment and Training Act, which is being promoted by the Jobs for All Campaign. The bill already has 57 co-sponsors. In early 2014, Conyers and his co-chair, Congresswoman Frederica Wilson, launched the first-ever Congressional Full Employment Caucus and convened a public forum on "Employment: A Human Right" that attracted a standing-room-only crowd in the House Office Building.

On March 22, 2014, a public forum on HR 1000 will be held at the University of DC Law School, and plans are afoot for a DC National Day of Action focused on HR 1000 in late May or early June. And on April 28 a national gathering will focus on establishing a $15 per hour minimum wage, as was done in SeaTac, Washington.

The greatest obstacle to expanding and deepening these efforts is cynicism and passivity. Most Americans believe they can't have much impact, so they remain inactive, thereby fulfilling their prophecy. Overcoming this circular dynamic is an urgent task. To achieve that goal, activists need to develop new organizing methods.

MORE EFFECTIVE METHODS

Like the rest of our society, most activist organizations get wrapped up in facts and figures and policy prescriptions, and fail to affirm underlying moral values. They rely on tapping anger and fear, and neglect deeper feelings of love and faith. They aim to score victories by defeating opponents, rather than seeking win-win solutions. They focus on the outer world and ignore the inner world. They aim to change others and overlook the need to change themselves. They overlook the need to empower people.

They lecture, often with a shrill tone, and try to "educate," rather than engaging in authentic dialog. They function like an impersonal machine that uses people until they use them up. They tend to believe that some one person must always be in charge – that individuals must either dominate or submit – rather than collaborate as equals.

They have too many boring meetings. They don't sing and dance enough. They are too serious. They don't have enough fun. They forget to love the universe and the life force that energizes it.

These patterns drive away many potential activists. If we want to build an effective full employment movement, we need to develop new ways of organizing.

FULL EMPLOYMENT CLUBS

One method that could help is to grow a network of "full employment clubs" that attract new members with contagious happiness. The members of these clubs could share meals, socialize informally, and support one another in their personal growth, community building and political action.

These self-governing clubs would engage in a wide variety of activities. Different clubs would experiment with different methods. Some members might convene support groups for unemployed workers, or lobby their Congressperson.

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Hepatitis C Awareness Week in Oakland

Saturday, March 8—Saturday, March 15



A concert in Snow Park celebrates Oasis Clinic's work to eradicate Hepatitis C.

OASIS Clinic and its allies are holding Hepatitis C Awareness Week in Oakland, from Saturday, March 8 through Saturday, March 15.

OASIS is an Oakland-based, nonprofit clinic dedicated to eradicating Hepatitis C through education, testing, and medical treatment. Hepatitis C has been a "silent killer" for decades, affecting millions of people, including many unaware that they have this potentially life threatening disease. This year Hepatitis C Awareness Week is more important than ever, because new medications have been approved. There are new treatments that are saving lives. Hepatitis C is now curable.

The OASIS clinic, Oakland City Council, service providers and community stakeholders will join forces to raise awareness through public education, Hepatitis C testing, and a Hepatitis C Awareness Walk around Lake Merritt. Together we can make Oakland "Hep-C Free!!" Visit us on facebook at "Hep C Free Oakland" or by email at hepcfreeoakland@gmail.com.

Finding Moral Beauty in the Lives of the Poor

from page 1

Peru who bravely stood up to armed troops, black schoolchildren "who walked into white schools while people screamed at them on all sides," and certain Vietnam vets "who fought in a war I hated," but also taught so much about courage, love of comrades, and sacrifice.

When he looks back at these crucial moments of inspiration, Marin can also see a small group of homeless friends marching slowly across the entire breadth of the North American continent. On Martin Luther King's birthday in 1989, they set out on a cross-country march from Santa Barbara, California, to the massive Housing Now! demonstration in Washington, D.C. It took the small band 10 long months to walk 3,000 miles from the West Coast to the nation's capitol.

At some indefinable point, the march became something more than a protest for human rights. It became a pilgrimage, a procession that Marin found no less holy than the peace pilgrimages of Buddhist monks marching for the sanctity of life.

At heart, it was all about soul. As Marin wrote: *"I believe now we crossed/ not only the country/ but a far region inside where/ the soul has its home."*

These experiences on the road were crucial in the formation of his conscience, and his personal friendships with the homeless friends he traveled with on these journeys helped give his later activism a profoundly personal dimension.

Peter the Mariner

As he reflects on his years of advocacy, the insights that emerge are rarely of the comforting kind. They tend to be more unsettling than inspiring, as if his thoughts have taken shape in the dark night of the soul, like the troubled dreams of a dead-tired traveler on a midnight train.

Marin is a poet, and during our interview, I involuntarily recall the shipwrecked seafarer from Samuel Taylor Coleridge's epic poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner." The Ancient Mariner is a haunted figure, shaken by his own conscience, who has been condemned to wander the earth as a penance for killing an albatross on his nearly ruinous voyage.

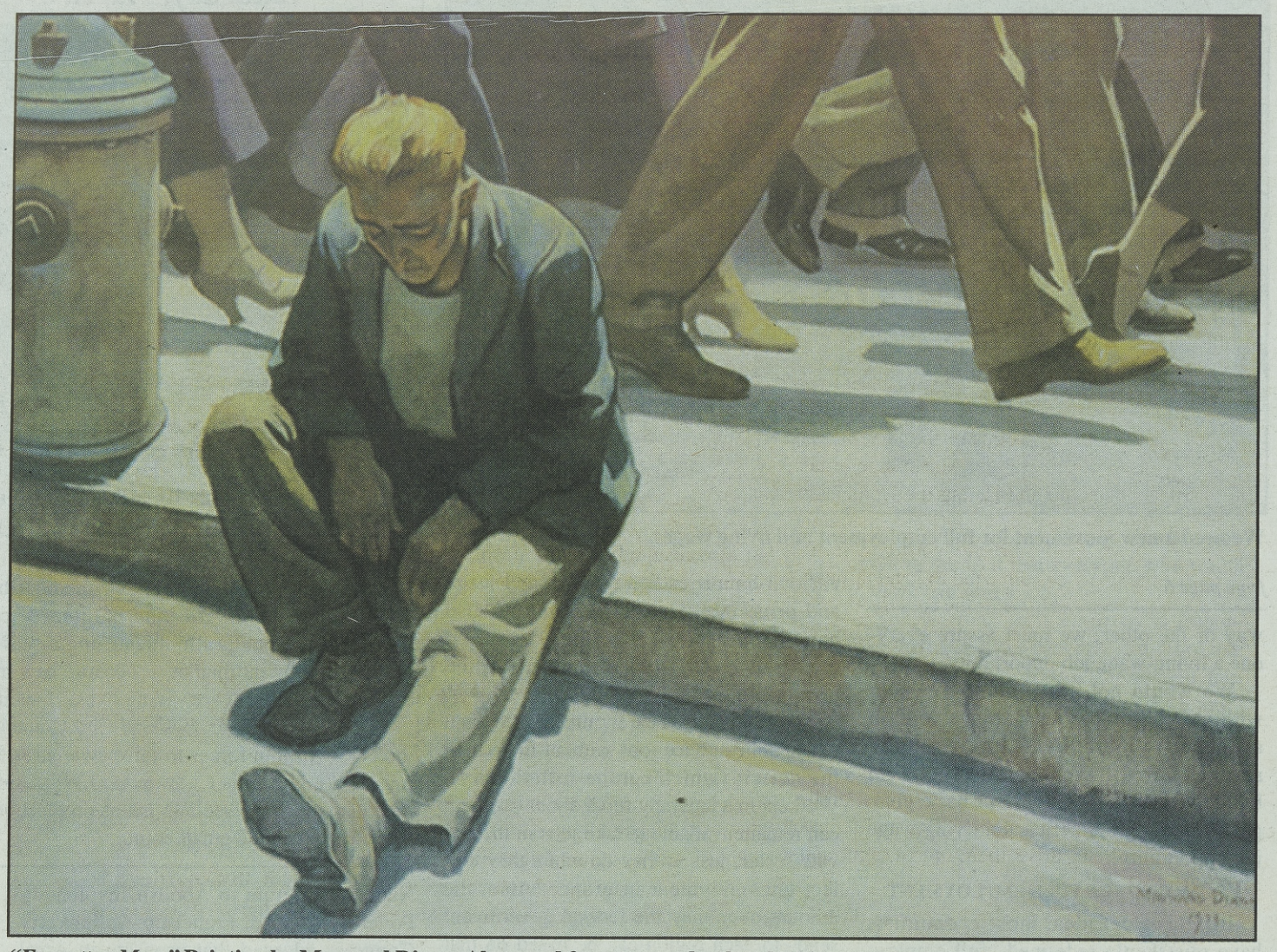
For the rest of his life, the Mariner is compelled to teach the hard lessons he learned while adrift at sea — lessons about the darkness of the human heart and the saving grace of kindness. The Mariner calls for love and compassion for all things great and small.

He prayeth best, who loveth best
All things both great and small;
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.

I can't help but realize how closely Marin's very name echoes that of the Mariner, and how his life's journey seems reminiscent of the haunted seafarer: *Peter the Mariner*. Both mariners saw the tragic suffering and deaths of their friends. Both came to understand the central significance of kindness. The key difference is that Peter Marin's journey took place on land, rather than at sea. Or did it?

Marin's narrative poem, "The Walkers," described this 3,000-mile march in images that make it seem like the experiences of a small band of sailors lost at sea. In Marin's poem, in the midst of the great American landmass of prairies and mountains, we suddenly see a disturbing echo of the Ancient Mariner "shipwrecked, driven wild by thirst," and seeing "imagined rescuers" on the horizon. This passage from Marin's "The Walkers" is strangely evocative of the Ancient Mariner:

By the light of our fires we
heard men speak of lost children
or the pain of exile



"Forgotten Man." **Painting by Maynard Dixon. Alone and forgotten, a desolate-looking man is avoided and ignored by passers-by.**

with no hope of return.
In sleep they cried out to us
as do those shipwrecked
driven wild by thirst
who see on the horizon
imagined rescuers.

Just as Coleridge's Mariner was compelled ever after to warn about the urgent need for love and kindness, Marin's poetry and activism have become a lifelong call for more compassion, more love.

Marin's epic poem cycle on homelessness, "Margins," is an odyssey through the back alleys and broken dreams of what sociologist Michael Harrington once called the "Other America" — the hidden America of poverty. Marin's poem cycle is just as important as Harrington's renowned indictment of economic inequality.

The Geography of Loss

In every state of the nation, Marin and his fellow marchers witnessed homeless men arrested for sleeping on riverbanks, homeless women falling victim to hunger and illness and cruel weather, and parents struck down by the loss of their children.

In Marin's unforgettable phrase, such daily tragedies formed "a geography of loss" that encompasses an entire nation.

The grieved faces melt into one
the cities combine skies
become a single huge roof
above a chamber of sorrows
stretching from sea to shining sea.

These hauntingly beautiful poems serve as an elegy for the oppressed, a reminder of their humanity, and a shocking jolt to the conscience of a nation gone wrong.

The Personal is Political

The personal is political, as the saying goes. In the case of Marin, the personal is poetical. Marin's poetics and his political activism both stem from his personal connections to homeless individuals.

In a land where homeless people are endlessly persecuted by every cop, politician and businessman, it is almost a revolutionary act when a poet finds beauty in their lives, and restores their stolen dignity.

After my own 30 years of homeless activism, Marin's poetry is one of the few things I have discovered that is of lasting value. His poems enable us to see the sacred beauty of people living on the streets all around us. That is an amazing accomplishment in a culture that has almost unanimously concluded that the lives of the poor have no value at all.

Renaissance artists often painted beautiful portraits of the nobility and royalty. Marin's poetry turns that world upside down by portraying the lives of homeless people as sources of great artistic beauty. Marin sees nobility disguised under shabby overcoats and finds beauty hidden inside cardboard shacks, in the people that America forgot. His poetry illuminates and transfigures, so that we no longer see only victims laid low by poverty. Rather, we see into the human soul — shining, sacred and somehow everlasting.

That is not to say that his poem cycle romanticizes homelessness. His poems offer stark glimpses into the despair and ugliness of poverty, the cruelty and violence of the streets, the lonely men suffering in hospital wards, the agony of parents who have lost their children. Dante's underworld, with no hope for deliverance.

Yet, just as often, he portrays selfless acts of kindness because he has personally witnessed this kind of moral beauty on the streets, time after time.

Sell-Out Social Workers

Marin condemns career-oriented social workers who sell out the interests of the poor people they supposedly serve, and refuse to oppose anti-poor laws so as not to jeopardize their careers.

"They don't know any of the homeless people," Marin said. "They know them only because they sit across the desk from them as social workers and service providers. They have a program to which people have to apply and they have hoops through which people have to jump. But they're not out on the streets living with people or helping them day by day. They are good members of the privileged class. They don't identify with the poor."

The Freedom Riders who risked their lives in the civil rights era found the strength to continue because of their personal bonds and friendships. Marin said, "What the Freedom Riders had on their minds were their sisters and mothers and fathers and brothers. So I think true advocates are speaking for their friends. And I think service providers are the people who sit across the desk from you, whether they work for the state or a private agency."

Marin's words remind me of the importance attached to love and friendship by the liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez. In *We Drink From Our Own Wells,* Gutierrez wrote: "It is a work of concrete, authentic love for the poor that is not possible apart from bonds of real friendship with those who suffer despoliation and injustice. The solidarity is not with 'the poor' in the abstract but with human beings of flesh and bone. Without love and affection, without—why not say it?—tenderness, there can be no true gesture of solidarity."

Tenderness. Gutierrez, the tough-minded liberation theologian who courageously denounces government repression in the slums of Lima, Peru, calls out for *tenderness*. Tenderness is a trait that poets are often accused of, almost as if it were an affliction. Tenderness is exactly the word I would use to describe Marin's poems about heartbroken and homesick wanderers.

Marin founded the Committee for Social Justice to help represent people who ran afoul of anti-homeless laws. The Committee also proposed innovative solutions to homelessness, including safe camping zones, legalized vehicular camping, and a county loan program to enable homeless people to purchase vehicles to live in — a readily achievable approach to creating the most low-cost housing of all.

Some of these solutions worked, others were turned down by county officials, but they were all based on a practical commitment to helping neighbors in need, rather than brewed up in an academic study of demographics and sociological statistics.

After four people froze to death in a 10-day span a few winters ago in Santa Barbara County, Marin and a few activists succeeded in opening emergency warming centers. The Board of Supervisors had been debating the issue for three years until the activists packed their chambers and demanded the funding to open the centers.

Four years later, the emergency warming centers are still operating — and still saving lives. The centers open when temperatures drop below 35 degrees at night, or when it is raining. With their emphasis on giving life-saving help, the warming

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Finding Moral Beauty

Peter Marin's hauntingly beautiful poems serve as an elegy for the oppressed, a reminder of their humanity, and a shocking jolt to the conscience of a nation gone wrong.

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centers are emblematic of the "tenderness" that Gutierrez valued so highly.

In 1987, the Homeless Coalition in Santa Barbara succeeded in forcing the city to temporarily suspend its sweeping anti-camping laws after threatening to organize a huge march with renowned activist Mitch Snyder that "would make Santa Barbara the Selma of the '80s."

During that struggle, Marin's seminal article, "Helping and Hating the Homeless: The Struggle at the Margins of America," was published in *Harper's Magazine*. It was then passed from hand to hand through advocacy circles all over the country.

I still remember how strongly his article affected me. It was almost clairvoyant in its vision of what was ultimately at stake in the struggle over human rights. Marin exposed the officials who pretend to "help" homeless people by scouring away every last vestige of their presence from tourist destinations and pleasant shopping malls, in a mad effort to drive them out of sight and out of mind.

In describing how a woman named Alice had become homeless in Los Angeles, he wrote that her life was destabilized by a series of catastrophic blows, followed by smaller traumatic events, "each one deepening the original wound," until homelessness became inevitable.

Marin also reported a deeper truth that only he saw with such clarity at the time — a truth of immeasurable importance about a society that produces massive numbers of homeless people. He wrote: "You are struck continually, hearing these stories, by something seemingly unique in American life, the absolute isolation involved. In what other culture would there be such an absence or failure of support from familial, social, or institutional sources?"

This is why Marin insists so strongly that impersonal social workers with their endless, dehumanizing regulations are not the solution to homelessness. Rather, they are only one more facet of the alienation and isolation in American society that reduces vulnerable people to despair.

Peter Marin has been married to Kathryn Marin for his entire life, and the couple has two children. He taught literature at Hofstra University and Los Angeles State College, and was a professor of journalism at USC in Los Angeles and at the University of Santa Barbara. He was a fellow at the prestigious Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, a think tank run by Robert Hutchins that analyzed major social and political questions in the light of Western history and philosophy.

When he became the director of Pacific High School, a radically experimental high school in the Santa Cruz mountains, Marin believed in freedom and let the students make the rules for this "school of the world." As a result of that experience, he wrote widely about education and was even the keynote speaker at the National Convention of the PTA. An influential essay he wrote for *The Center Magazine*, "The Open Truth and Fiery Vehemence of Youth," was sent all over the country and was later published in his book of essays, *Freedom and Its Discontents*.

Later, Marin spent years writing about veterans and the war in Vietnam. His article in *Harper's*, "Coming to Terms with Vietnam," made a big splash and drew a lot of attention from veterans organizations. Marin was one of the first writers to investigate the deep sources of guilt and remorse that plagued many veterans about what they had seen and done in Vietnam.

"People who had shot women and children in the war, would come home and think about what they had done during the war, and would be extremely troubled. That's something you can't undo. You can't bring the dead back. So I thought a lot of what they hygienically call PTSD was anger and guilt. People couldn't live not just with their relatives, they couldn't live with themselves."

The Vietnam War not only caused countless deaths, physical disabilities and diseases from exposure to Agent Orange, but also resulted in many deeply troubled veterans ending up as homeless casualties of a war that is still not over.

After a lifetime of pondering the tragic victims of war and working with those persecuted as homeless outcasts, what gives Marin any hope for the human condition?

A poetic passage in his *Street Spirit* essay on "Moral Beauty" nearly *sings* about the beauty of the human condition. There is a light that still shines in the darkness, even on a midnight train.

"Wherever and in whomever we find love, courage, sacrifice, generosity of spirit, resistance to power and injustice, the telling of truth and a faith kept with others — ah, it is there that beauty appears, shining forth."



"Going Nowhere." **Maynard Dixon said his painting of a man walking down railroad tracks showed the "mood of a man over 50 who had slept too often in the rain."**

San Diego

by Peter Marin

Bring my slippers, Mother,
and let me sit in silence,
tired of my wandering
and sick to death of violence.

Bring my slippers, Mother,
as darkness fills the treetops,
and I will tell you stories
as meaningful as Aesop's.

Bring my slippers, Mother,
and listen close beside me
to how throughout my country
men punished or reviled me.

Bring my slippers, Mother,
and we'll whisper close together,
far from the cruelties of men
and God's cold winter weather.

GALLUP

by Peter Marin

Where the town stops, my life begins.
To the east, low twilit buttes.
To the west, white snowy peaks.
In my heart, a vacancy beyond belief.

Not One

by Peter Marin

The poor line the hall
on your way to the bathroom.
They wait at the foot of the stairs
when you go for the mail.
They're in the backseat
backing out of the driveway
on your way to the store.
And they dine beside you
unspoken at the table
waiting patiently for bread.
They never put out their hands.
They keep their eyes shut.
They hold up no signs.
But crossing the streets
you will know them from dreams
though their faces turn away.
There is not one who does not see you:
you must change your life.

Men in Blue

by Peter Marin

Be good, little darling,
or the men in blue
some cold night
will come seeking you,

stamping out your fire,
ripping down your tent,
destroying all you own
in the name of the State.

Be good, little darling,
or the men in blue,
some cold night
will come seeking you,

trussing up your wrists,
twisting back your arm,
taking you to prison
just for trying to
stay warm.

Ark of Loneliness

by Peter Marin

Filing in, one by one,
as if into an ark
of loneliness, out of the rain,
the shelter, its gray
emptiness anchored
at the bottom by green cots
arranged in rows, boots
tucked under, men asleep,
rocked on the surface
of watery dreams by a
great storm never to end.

THE BABIES

by Peter Marin

It's the babies, the babies,
the babies — the streets by day
the shelter at night
and the kids squabbling and no
school and the five of us
place to place hour by hour
walking and sitting
and waiting to eat.
It's what breaks your heart and
your back aches and legs give out
one in your arms
another on your shoulders
two of them tugging at your hands.
It's like a long march
a forced journey
the Israelites crossing the desert —
so hot in the sun
you think you'll faint
so cold at dusk you think you'll die
and the shelter miles away
and hours before it opens
and no sweaters for the kids
and all of them crying *I want I want*
and you're always saying
no no no no no no no no
so that it gets to be a kind of song
one no for each time
your foot comes down
trying for luck not to
step on the cracks

Once All of Them Boys

by Peter Marin

Here is the drunk man,
here is the one-legged man,
here is the man talking to himself
in the voice of another, a master.
Here is the drugged man,
here is the man without legs —
four wheels and leathered fists.
Here is the naked man in a doorway,
here is the huddled man in a womb,
here is a bogey man, frightened.
Here is a man adrift on a raft,
here is a man marooned on an island,
here is an infantry-man left to die
here is an old man left on an ice floe.
Here is a learned man, mindless.
Here is a dancing man, lame.
Here is a working man, idle.
Here is a kind man, gone bad.
Here are the men, once all of them boys
hopeful of futures, anxious for joys,
now asleep in a subway
with its dirt and its noise.

Midnight

by Peter Marin

Midnight **bought the farm,**
Stone Eddie **cashed in,**
Red Sunshine **is down —**
the word comes out along
the grapevine like drums
in the jungle or a card
carried on a silver dish.
Each time you hear it
a tree crashes down —
God's hand laying low
every man I ever knew.
Whole towns have dried up
with men the wild beasts
pressed to barbed wire
thirsty and spent —
a cheap hotel torn down,
a lunchroom boarded up,
an old pawn-shop closed.
What's left for us, the zoo?
Forty years on the road
you get an elephant's hide,
but when last week I saw
that down by the river
they'd paved the jungle over
I knelt on the bank and I cried.

The Shelter

by Peter Marin

Women and kids to one side,
men to the other, intake workers
weeding out the drunks and bums —
makes you think of the camps.
You been here before?
You promise to work?
Can you prove who you are?
It's like crossing a border,
it's like entering heaven,
as the keepers of the gate,
with blank implacable eyes,
decide who lives, who dies.

The *Street Spirit* Interview with Peter Marin

"The whole debate about housing is an absolute and total lie. It's a lie because the people who are talking about it are not really interested in protecting the poor. They know they're supposed to protect them, but they're not."



Peter Marin, poet, author, journalist, teacher — and activist. Kim Rierson photo

"Am I surprised that homelessness is increasing? No. The sad part is that we had Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal, and then we've had crap and bullshit in the 80 years since Roosevelt. That's all it's been." — Peter Marin

Interview by Terry Messman

Street Spirit: *You have been involved in homeless activism for nearly 30 years, ever since the massive increase in homelessness in the 1980s. In your experience, is the current level of poverty unprecedented in the United States? And what is your understanding of the relationship between homelessness and poverty?*

Peter Marin: Yes, it is unprecedented. But I think homelessness is what happens to people when they *fall out* of poverty. I think it's very hard for us to understand that, because we do have certain social mechanisms — certain programs like welfare, unemployment and disability insurance — which are actually, in a way, set up to keep people *in poverty*, right?

You know, welfare is never enough to get you out of poverty. It's enough to keep you continuously *in poverty* until something goes wrong — and then you fall into homelessness. Homelessness usually occurs when none of the other programs have worked, or when you've come to their end, or when you've violated whatever welfare rules there are, and when your money dries up.

Spirit: *Do you expect that the rates of homelessness and poverty will lessen or increase in the foreseeable future?*

Marin: If anything, it's going to get worse now than it was in the past few years, because the worst times to be homeless are in economic boom times.

Spirit: *Why do boom times make things worse for people living in poverty?*

Marin: Because in boom times, rents go up, and gentrification occurs. When new buildings start going up, they start tearing down the old parts of cities. It's when people have more money to spend and invest that the little pockets where the homeless people manage to survive begin to disappear.

Spirit: *Newspapers carry cheerful articles in the real estate sections about how rising housing prices are good news for upper-class homeowners and realtors. Yet, good news for the wealthy is very bad news for poor people who end up evicted due to rising rents and gentrification.*

Marin: That's right! And this is a very interesting mechanism that I don't think anybody, including the Obama people, have really started to confront face to face — and that is, as you start to make things better for the middle class, they become worse for the poorest of the poor.

Spirit: *It's counterintuitive because people think a rising economy will lift all boats. Why is it that a rising economy for the rich often sinks the poor?*

Marin: Rents begin to go up and people have more money. This happened many years ago in San Francisco, in Santa Barbara, in Chicago and New York. The skid row parts of the city become valuable as real estate because people are going to buy the old buildings, tear them down, and put up housing for the well-to-do. And in good years, or boom times, this process speeds up considerably.

People have more money and they have to invest it somewhere and housing and land are one of the best places to invest it. So they begin to look to those areas for profits — and their profits are really high. But in making those profits, you tear down the parts of the city which belonged to the poor.

Also, when people have more money, they begin to move into buildings in the city, they begin to build lofts, to build apartments. Even in Harlem, in New York, that's going on now. And what you find is that the areas which once belonged to people of different nationalities or ethnic backgrounds for long periods of time, are now subject to invasion from outside.

You can see that in New York, in San Francisco, and in other large cities. All of a sudden, there are posh restaurants where there used to be rundown taverns and places where poor people used to eat or drink, where they used to get haircuts, where they used to play pool, and where they used to live. All of these places vanish completely and cities are quite happy to see them vanish. They encourage this process.

I suppose it's also going on in Oakland, right? This is great for the city, this is great for young people with money, and this is great for the businesses that appeal to young people with money. The only ones who get injured are the poor.

Spirit: *In Oakland, a writer called it "The Tale of Two Cities," with one city for the rich, and an entirely different city for the poor. The wealthy enjoy an economic upswing and poor renters are evicted.*

Marin: There are two economies — and this has happened in a way that I think has become almost permanent now. Theoretically, you once could use the school system to rise up out of one class and into another, but that no longer works very well. Charles Murray has written about "the Super Zips" — the zip codes in which the rich live. What happens in those areas is that the rich subsidize their school system with music programs and arts programs and athletic programs. So it turns out, of course, that the children of the rich, when they go to public schools, are getting a totally different education than the children of the poor.

Spirit: *Many people first became involved in fighting against the huge increase in homelessness in the early 1980s. It's now 30 years later. Does it surprise you that homelessness has persisted so stubbornly and has only grown larger in the last three decades?*

Marin: No, it is not surprising. Look, years ago, I would go out and lecture about homelessness. People would ask me: "What's going to make it better?" I would say, "It's not going to get better."

Spirit: *Why such a gloomy prediction?*

Marin: Because what it's going to take to make it better is so far outside the usual frames of American political and social reference, that it's just not likely to happen.

Spirit: *What are these solutions to homelessness that you feel will not happen?*

Marin: Let's start with this: disability. You know how much disability payments are — $800 to $900 a month, maybe, for those who can even qualify. It was that same amount 20 years ago!

Twenty years ago, if you got disabled, the whole purpose of disability benefits was to give you just enough to scrape by on your own because everyone knew you couldn't work. So you would rent a downtown hotel room for $500 a month, and then you would have $300 to $400 left to spend on your needs. You could eat cheaply in diners, and get reasonable medical care if you were impoverished.

But you could get by. Now, 20 years later, disability payments are exactly the same amount that they were back then. But what is the cost of a room, if there are even any rooms? What happened to all the hotel rooms in the Bay Area?

Spirit: *The rents skyrocketed in price or the hotels were torn down and gentrified. We've seen a massive number of "evictions for profit."*

Marin. Exactly. Exactly. Now, have you heard a local or national politician talk even once about raising disability payments?

Spirit: *No, the battle recently has been to cut benefits even more. A few liberals may oppose cutting them too severely, but that's about it.*

Marin: Right, and no one says that the purpose of disability was to make it possible for people to survive without being on the streets, so let's raise them to the level it takes to survive.

Spirit: *That's right. If rents have tripled and quadrupled, let's triple or quadruple the benefits, just so people have a chance to remain housed.*

Marin: Yeah, and this is for people who we know cannot work through no fault of their own! This is for people who may have worked 20 years, and are not able to work now! And also, it's so much harder to get disability because they've tightened all the requirements. Now, even when you deserve it, it's hard to get because they have all these rules.

I have a friend who is a medical adviser to the disability program, so I hear these things all the time. The rules have tightened up, and what's going on with disability is going on everywhere. You know the welfare rules. If you have a man in the house, you don't get welfare!

I don't think anybody really understands that. The first thing I would do is change the welfare rules so that couples could get welfare. But welfare is still mostly only for women. There are a few exceptions in a few states where they have jiggled the system a little.

But does anybody understand that the welfare rules destroy the black family because it drives men out of the house and onto the street just so the women can get money from the government? No, nobody seems to understand that. These things are unconscionable.

When welfare was begun under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, the program was welfare for women, work for men. So we had the work programs of the CCC and the WPA. [The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Works Progress Administration were programs launched under Roosevelt's New Deal to put men back to work during the Depression.]

All the work projects of the 1930s were for men and welfare was for women who they thought at that time should stay in the house. But we don't have work projects any more, even though we know we have an infrastructure crisis going on in America. But has Obama or anyone else talked about a new federal work program for the unemployed and the homeless? No! So what do men get? They get general relief, which is $90 a month.

Spirit: *In many areas, they may get general relief or general assistance for only three months out of the year.*

Marin: So that's unconscionable! But who confronts any of this? It's true we have an argument about unemployment, but unemployment is not for people at the bottom of the system who have fallen through the cracks of the system.

I don't usually like to use the word hopeless, because I'm not without hope for the future. But this situation is fucking hopeless. And the politicians who are supposed to deal with it are hopeless.

Spirit: *In the 1980s, Reagan drastically slashed federal housing programs. Since then, public housing has been cut by every new administration until now it has been decimated. Yet no one is calling for a massive investment in low-income housing.*

Marin: Let me give you a local example of that. In Santa Barbara, we have a little bit of affordable housing because they make an attempt to produce it, but I think the minimum it costs is $50,000 a unit. It's not easy to put up affordable housing.

Now, we have countless people living in vehicles and RVs. But we have laws against living in your RV. We don't say, "Well, we know we don't have housing for people, so we know that one of the things poor people can do is live in RVs." Instead, every law on the books says you can't sleep overnight in a vehicle. If you park an RV within 500 feet of a church or a public building or a park, you get a ticket, and if you can't pay the ticket, they will tow your vehicle away.

We build housing, yes, but we know we can't build enough housing for everybody. So now we have the problem of what to do with everybody else, and yet when they say

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Street Spirit Interview with Peter Marin

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they're going to buy a vehicle and live in it, we tell them they can't.

So all the discussions seem to me absolutely senseless and disingenuous, because we are not really concerned about people getting off the street and sleeping inside *something*. Because if we were concerned about that, we'd make laws that permit them to sleep in RVs, and we'd make laws that permit them to put a tent over their heads. So I live in a town where we build a small amount of affordable housing, but we forbid people at night from putting a cardboard box or a tent over their heads. And if the police find it, they rip it up or they tear it down.

Spirit: *So even though it is not costing the system anything, they won't let people crawl in a tent or sleep under a box. The police raid and destroy every camp.*

Marin: That means the whole debate about housing is an absolute and total lie. It's a lie because the people who are talking about it are not really interested in protecting the poor. They know they're supposed to protect them, but they're not.

We have maybe 4,000 to 6,000 homeless people in Santa Barbara County, and we are happy when we manage to get 200 or 300 people off the streets in a year. But that means all the thousands of others are breaking the law every night they're outside on the street. Now, that's not a rational system. That's a crazy system.

So am I surprised that homelessness is increasing? No. The sad part is that we had Franklin Delano Roosevelt and the New Deal, and then we've had crap and bullshit in the 80 years since Roosevelt. That's all it's been.

Spirit: *What an indictment! Someone needed to say that! We need to begin here, by telling the truth about how federal officials keep slashing public housing. Do you think the U.S. government should play a massive role in subsidizing low-income housing, like it did during the New Deal?*

Marin: Absolutely. One of the government's first responsibilities would be to see that there is adequate housing for all of its citizens. Just as one of the other major requirements would be to provide enough food, and adequate education to allow young people to find an appropriate place in the world as adults.

No one should starve. We know that, right? This is what the government must do. Leave all the war stuff aside, leave the NSA stuff aside, and the billions spent on this by the government. The first thing — the very first thing, beyond everything else — should be housing, damn it. It goes without question.

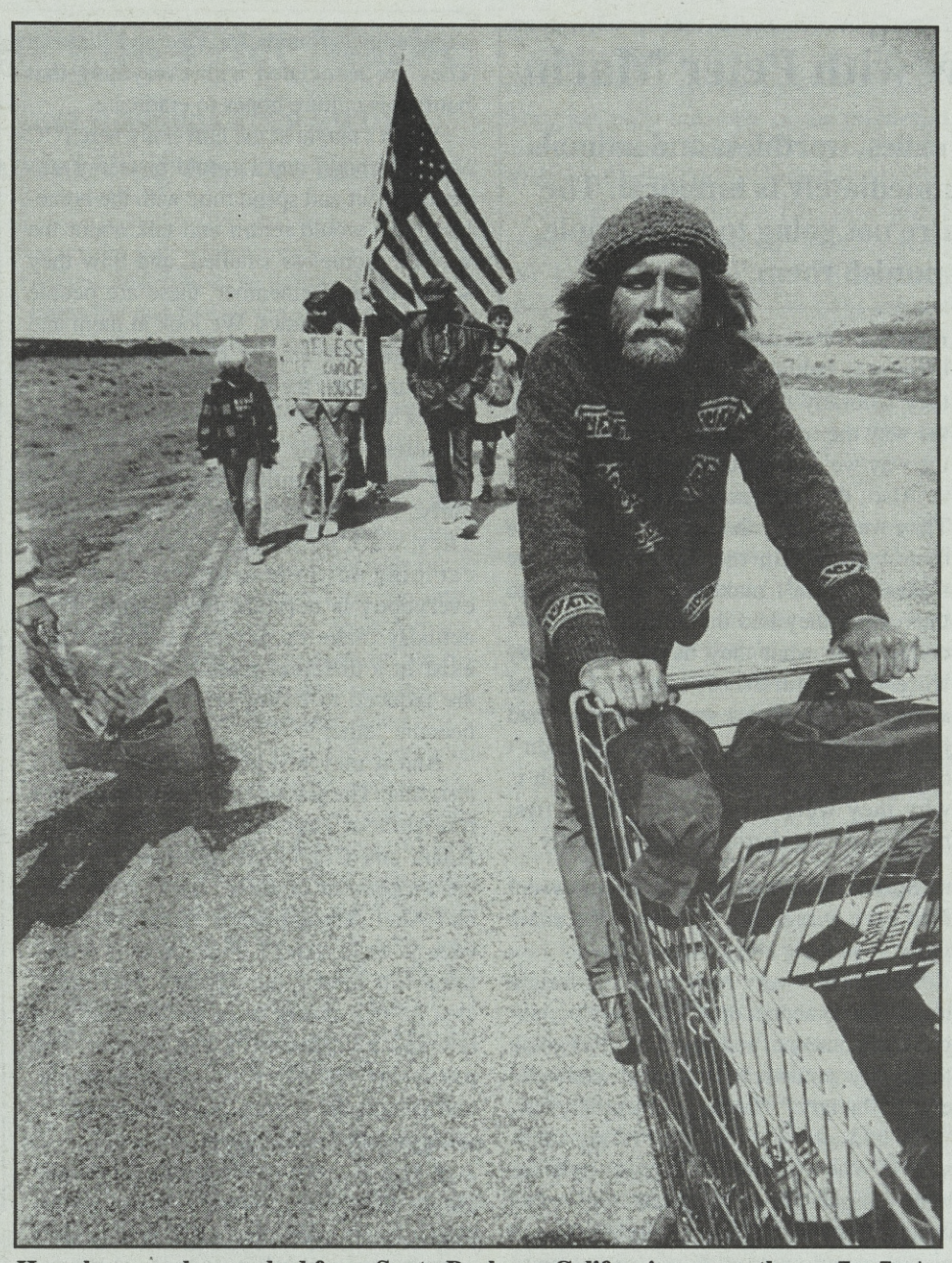
Spirit: *Why is housing the very highest priority of all?*

Marin: Because it is so necessary for human survival. Remember back when Abraham Maslow listed the hierarchy of human needs? You begin with what is necessary, and then what is preferable.

We know that food and housing are the necessary things. If government has any responsibility, it's either to see that people have these necessities, or not to interfere with their creating them. In many places, the government has now made so many rules about what kind of housing you can put up. One reason that housing for the poor is so expensive is that it has to satisfy zoning regulations everywhere.

Spirit: *You said that almost no politician today has enough courage to even raise disability benefits. Are any politicians out there calling on the government to make a massive investment in housing?*

Marin: Maybe Bernie Sanders, the independent from Vermont, and maybe Dennis Kucinich when he hopelessly ran for the presidency, and there may be a couple more.



Homeless people marched from Santa Barbara, California, across the entire country to join the Housing Now protest in Washington, D.C., in 1989. Pictured in back with the march sign is Peter Marin. Eve Fowler photo

Spirit: *So what is the prognosis for the federal government creating a massive new housing program?*

Marin: Even Obama, who was supposedly a community organizer — how can someone be a community organizer and not know that housing is absolutely essential? How can he have been a community organizer, and not now insist on housing? I think housing is necessary, and cheap housing is even more necessary. People ought to bend the damn zoning laws to enable cheap, temporary housing, and emergency housing.

Spirit: *Along with our nation's failure to house its citizens, it is also failing to educate them. The second-class education given to children in low-income areas often leads to second-rate job opportunities, second-rate colleges, or no colleges.*

Marin: The drop-out rates are really scary, although it's very hard to get legitimate figures. California, which used to have a great school system, is now down towards the bottom of the nation in terms of money spent per student, and in terms of results. These things are really scary and we hear noises from politicians about preschools and improving the schools, but I don't think they're getting any better. I just don't see it.

Spirit: *Society fails to invest in the lives of poor people at the very beginning when children enter school?*

Marin: Yes. Yet, outside of *noblesse oblige,* why would anybody invest in them? I mean we have enough workers to go around, so it is an interesting situation. We have enough people to go around to staff our industries now. So, if you do a cost-benefit analysis of what you get out of educating people, outside of keeping the social peace, I don't know why anybody would do it. You'd have to do it because you really believe in democracy.

Spirit: *Yes, that would be the reason — to create an educated democracy, just as Thomas Jefferson envisioned.*

Marin: That's right. But I don't know who believes in that now. People give it lip service but that doesn't count, as we know.

Spirit: *Recent research has documented an alarming increase in the extent of poverty in this country. What effect so you think that is having on our democracy?*

Marin: We know that poverty is extensive and vast and I believe it's probably underestimated. Also, do we want to count in the poverty rates those middle-class people who become poor as soon as they lose their jobs? They're not impoverished yet, but they live right on its edge.

The question is: How many people feel as if they live in a society stable enough to guarantee them, in some general way, long-term safety between now and death? I don't think anybody has that anymore — outside of the one percent that everybody speaks of. And this is what's scary.

It's hard to imagine anybody even proposing that we *ought* to have a society like that. I'm not talking about cradle-to-grave social services. I'm just talking about a certain kind of economic and social stability where people can breathe a little easier, and look down the road and think that things will probably be OK.

The loss of that stability is a gigantic loss. And it's been lost now not just to people who live in poverty, but to many people in the middle class. And how you count *that* number, I don't know.

If I go through my friends one by one, I can see large numbers of them who are trying to save as much money as they can, not for their own use, but to make sure that their children have a modicum of safety in the future. Because I don't think that any of them really believe that 20 years from now, their children are going to be better off, or even safe. Now, living that way is a really scary thing and to have an entire society like that is really troublesome.

Spirit: *Many people live with the constant anxiety of being a paycheck or two away from eviction.*

Marin: I could start reeling them off, the friends of mine who won't read the newspaper or look at the news any more, because if you do, you're overcome with a set of worries about — not yourself, so much — but the people you love, or the people who will be here after you're dead and gone, and I don't think many people know how to deal with that.

Even when they organize into Occupy or a demonstration or a political movement of one kind or another, I don't know who has the conviction these days that they know how to get us out of this fix.

Spirit: *How would you explain to a new visitor to our country — someone who knew nothing about us — why the richest nation in the world has a massive problem of poverty and homelessness?*

Marin: You know, I think all of this is fairly explicable in terms of our nation's history, and in terms of the Protestant ethic. It's a country that has always been dominated by a particular elite which sets the rules, and which has access to power in a way that other people do not.

What if we looked at America as if it were a Latin American country? There are countries in which the upper class essentially trades back the presidency every four to eight years, and it makes no difference whether the ruling party is in power, or one of the rival parties. The rich are going to be rich and the poor are going to be poor because it is kept that way intentionally. I think America is exactly like that.

Spirit: *In what ways is modern America exactly like that?*

Marin: Because both political parties are dominated by people with money. Both parties are dominated by people educated in certain places — Yale, Harvard, the University of Chicago. We have an education system that produces an elite. When the elite people grow up, they may have political differences with one another, and they may argue about a few small things, but they don't argue about turning the system upside down or really changing it.

You know, I taught at those schools as a lecturer or a visitor or a teacher. Even when people in poverty gain access to those schools, I've seen the way these schools take poor young students, and work very hard at making them a part of a particular class to which they're going to belong in the future. And that's the class that maintains power and doesn't rock the boat.

I taught journalism at the University of Southern California, and a student wrote me a paper in her senior year that had to do with her father being a garbage collector. She wrote in the paper, "This is the first time in my four years at USC that I've been willing to tell anybody that my father was a garbage collector." Because everybody knows what's expected of you in that new class. And if you want to make it into that class, then you behave.

Spirit: *So you keep your father's employment a hidden, shameful secret.*

Marin: Absolutely. I ran into that at several colleges. I was teaching at a college called Warren Wilson College, a little college outside Asheville, North Carolina. In the middle of a talk I was giving — of course, a talk about how the school needed to be changed — a young woman leaped up in tears and said, "I come from around here and I want to tell you that in the three years I've been here, everyone has made me feel like trailer trash."

I think that's one of the ways it feels when you are at one of those good schools without the social background that is required to belong there. I think that goes on all the time in America and nobody notices it. When I went to Swarthmore College, I was led to believe that I was better than other people. I knew we were

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Street Spirit Interview with Peter Marin

"Treating people as if they were exiles, worthless and animals is immoral. To not help them immediately is immoral. The deepest immorality is that if you're not going to help people, you have absolutely no right to punish them."

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special, and special, of course, means better. And if you go directly into your profession and become a lawyer or a doctor or a teacher, you become that knowing you are helping people who are your inferiors. No one will ever put it that way, but I don't think you can avoid that feeling

That was back in the days when I got the stuffing knocked out of me because I took freight trains and I suddenly realized there were plenty of people smarter and more courageous than I was who didn't have my education and maybe didn't need it.

Spirit: *What led you to begin riding the rails? And what did you learn from the travelers you met on those trains?*

Marin: I'm not sure why, but a year or two after college, I started taking freight trains, and rode on them out to California. I was out here in California when seasonal labor was done by marginal or transient or homeless men. The crop-picking was done by laborers who rode up and down the West Coast on freight trains. It was harvest work that was traditionally done by marginal men who traveled on the trains, helped with the crops, and then moved east again following the grain crops and ended up in Chicago for the winter.

Spirit: *Did you hop those trains out of restlessness?*

Marin: It was restlessness, but there was also something in me that never liked schooling at all. There are personality types like mine where you don't want to learn anything from anyone except from your own direct experience. So that all education which is being translated for you by intermediaries struck me as being unpleasant and authoritarian. I wanted to overcome the sense of being enclosed, the sort of hothouse atmosphere that many very good colleges have.

Spirit: *What did you begin learning from your fellow riders on the rails?*

Marin: I learned that intelligence, courage, inventiveness, toughness, the capacity to survive, the capacity to take risks, had nothing to do with the class that you come from. Some people learn that in war, of course, because we send our high school students to war, and lo and behold, they turn out to be brave and courageous.

Spirit: *In your article, "The Moral Beauty of Acts of Goodness and Justice," you described meeting people in hobo jungles who shared food and clothing. You said it was more inspiring than anything you'd found in great works of art.*

Marin: Absolutely. It was *de rigueur*, right? It was what people did. You were in the jungle with other people and whatever food there was got shared. Whatever bottle there was got passed around. There was no question of it. It was beyond argument. It was automatic. It was what people did.

Spirit: *I've seen that exact same thing — the way people who have almost nothing will readily share what little they have with one another, while upper-class people who could share so much, will share very little. Did you ever understand why?*

Marin: Well, I will tell you one thing. I believe that people who are on the margins of life or who have to exist hand-to-mouth, something of subsistence and tribal nature persist and will come to the surface. It is natural to share. The question is not why they do it, the question is why the rest of us don't. Somehow, they had removed from themselves the talons of bourgeois culture, and therefore the way they naturally thought was different from the way the rest of us think because that's the way we're taught to think.

Also, they had no destinies to protect. They weren't like the rest of us who have to put money in the bank against the future. It didn't make any difference to them what they had the next day, so they could share what they have today. They were not acquisitive, and all hope of acquiring enough or saving enough had just disappeared. Or maybe, they didn't have that nature to start with — which is why they were on the road in the first place, and then sharing comes naturally.

Spirit: *In every homeless encampment I've ever witnessed, I've seen the same thing — sharing comes naturally.*

Marin: It's very hard to take a freight train with someone, or to be in a hobo jungle with someone, and say, "Oh, I'm going to eat my sandwich, and watch someone else go hungry." People just naturally say, "Hey bud, do you want part of my sandwich?" When you're on the trains or in the hobo jungles and free of the oppressive order of society, some aspect of human nature, hitherto not put to use, comes up to the surface. So this sharing is not special — it's part of human nature.

That's what I like to think. I have never heard a report of a tribe where only *some* people died of hunger. They may kill an animal, and the chief gets the first choice, and then it goes down the line. But people at the end of the line still get something to eat. It's sort of automatic.

That's what people do when they're in small groups. They learn something about community and they learn something about freedom. They learn that you can function without authority. And that's what you see in the hobo jungles and on the trains. You see people figuring out how to function without authority.

Now, there are always sociopaths and there are always drunks, and if you're in a group with two or three drunks, it's a problem because they get hostile and angry and out of control. But barring these excesses, people manage to live together.

Spirit: *You could be describing the community that has formed out on the landfill at the Albany Bulb. Strangers moved to a dumping ground, set up tents and homes, and learned to live in community. They began looking out for each other — in freedom and without authority.*

Marin: What we have to remember is that just as violence probably comes naturally to us in certain circumstances, so does cooperation. That was the argument the anarchists like Kropotkin and Bakunin made long ago. And there's a lot of power in those arguments. Now such things work best in small groups and relatively stress-free environments, maybe not so well on the level of an entire nation.

Spirit: *Cities cannot enact segregation laws against any minority in our society, except one — homeless people. Why is it still acceptable for politicians to banish people merely for being homeless?*

Marin: First of all, you can see historically that the definition of poverty and the attitude towards poverty is intrinsic to the reformist movement that you find in England and America at the end of the 19th century. You see that the poor back then were described as public nuisances and dangers. Their living areas were seen as breeding grounds for vice and disease. They are associated with everything that bourgeois culture hopes to eradicate.

When I taught at the university here [UC Santa Barbara] and I would have my students go out and spend time with the homeless, they would return and talk about the way the homeless smelled, and how they scared them. Remember, these are people who are like outlaws. We look at them and we know they are not living according to any of the rules the rest of us observe.

It's very hard to get people to accept homeless people as being "us" because they look differently and they live differently. People are really afraid of them. They walk by them or they see them camping in their neighborhood, and everybody is nervous about them. They actually make us nervous because they exist in a different reality. When people are reduced to living on the streets, they become "other."

And it may just be visual. But there's also this: The notion of homelessness as a punishment runs through Christianity. Adam and Eve violate the law and they are kicked out of Eden. Same with Cain and Abel. The punishment for disobedience is exile. And I think there is something still deep in our psyches that associates homelessness with the breaking of law and punishment. I don't know why that is, but it's very difficult for people to understand the homeless as being of the same race they come from.

If you go back to the 17th century and the enclosure laws, when groups of people began to wander the countryside, laws were posted not letting people come off the roads into the towns. Wanderers had historically and culturally been seen as invaders and threats and for some reason that has never changed.

People who live in large cities begin to see homeless people as nuisances. Merchants don't like them. People don't like being asked for money. They don't like seeing people who are pulling carts around laden with their goods. It's aesthetically upsetting to people. I think the aesthetic response turns into a moral response. They just want people to go far away so they don't have to look at them anymore. That's the sense that I get in my town, Santa Barbara. The attempt to control the homeless is really an attempt to preserve the aesthetic beauty of the town, to keep the town pretty and to keep themselves safe. Yet it is deeply immoral.

Spirit: *Why do you say it is deeply immoral?*

Marin: Because if you look at it clearly, treating people as if they were exiles, worthless, and animals, is immoral. To not help them immediately is immoral. From my point of view, the deepest immorality is that if you're not going to help people, you have absolutely no right to punish them for finding their own way to live among us. So when you talk about the Albany Bulb, that is the lowest, the most immoral. The cruelest thing you can do is to deprive people of the right to take care of themselves when you have already decided not to take care of them on your own.

Spirit: *Homeless people in Albany were pushed around and told by police they must go live on a dumping ground. So they created a life for themselves with no help from anyone. Now, Albany officials want to forbid them from taking care of themselves and evict them altogether.*

Marin: Yes, and this happens everywhere. Everywhere there are sets of rules that make it impossible, or at least very difficult for the homeless to care for themselves. And that is outrageous. It is unforgivable. As you know, I've seen those laws made by Republicans and by Democrats. It doesn't mater who is in power. They make these stupid laws so that people can't take care of themselves.

The Coats

by Peter Marin

Let each man with two coats
explain to the mirror
why God should not punish him
while others have none —
freezing now, and snow falling,
and those without coats
huddled on city corners
or crumpled in doorways
or standing, hands out,
at the concert-hall door.
Didn't they fight your wars?
Didn't they pave your roads?
Didn't they tend you gently
when injured at the hospital
you ached for human touch?
Night after night, they die.
Night after terrible night
they sigh themselves away
in dumpsters, in burnt buildings,
in the back seats of junked cars
on the far edge of your cities.
They crowd your bedrooms in the dark,
they huddle under your silk sheets,
unseen, they bend over each sleeper
and touch with bloodied palms
this face, that breast,
given the task by a god
who wants no one to forget.
When, at night, you examine yourself,
there they are, in the mirror,
their pale faces the sky,
their tears the shimmering stars,
their trembling arms extended —
ah, you know whose arms those are!

SERENADE

by Peter Marin

No theory! Only
the act of compassion
repeated again and again
brings God into the world.
Here he is, his hand out, or
badly playing a battered clarinet,
bucket beside him on the street.
***Hey bud, ya gotta buck*?**
It's a ticket to the boneyard.
It's the price of living in America.
It's the last chance you have
to make it in the back door
of heaven. Hey, take it, bro!
And the song he is playing,
***I'm Gonna Buy a Paper Doll*,**
drifts over the empty streets.

Spirit: *Politicians try to deny the class system in this country, yet it's clearly visible all around us. We've created a society where tens of millions are poor, but, instead of trying to reduce poverty, the economic elite continue to slash their benefits and criminalize the poor.*

Marin: Where Marx was right was about class consciousness. I think it's pretty clear that the class you come from determines the way that you think. I think it's almost built into the class system that people will be unable to think of the poor and the homeless in different ways. I remember asking my students at UCSB when was the last time their families had been poor. Many of them had to go and ask their parents. But the fact is, none of these students knew they'd ever been poor. Do you see what a difference that makes?

The second part of what I found is that the people who were the most sympathetic to the homeless were Catholics. Not Protestants, but Catholics. The Catholics often came from very large families, and in the large families, they always had sinful, screw-up uncles, etc. So they knew people like the homeless, right? The other kids came from tiny families, often just one parent and one or two siblings, and they had no experience of human variation, no knowledge of poverty, and no one to tell them, "We were poor once."

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Street Spirit Interview with Peter Marin

"The liberal politicians are just unspeakably awful because they worry more about their careers than they do about the poor."

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This was a big thing if you were raised Jewish, as I was. This is what you heard all the time: "We were poor, we were poor, we were poor." So be nice to poor people. I knew I'd come from peasant stock, so I knew the people on the street who had nothing were not unlike my grandfather. I knew that in my bones, so there was not an abyss between me and the poor.

Spirit: *Well, that brings up a crucial point. Nearly all elected officials in the U.S. are well-off or outright rich. Do you think that helps explain their lack of compassion? Is it one reason why they pass laws that banish the poorest citizens?*

Marin: What class consciousness really means is that there is an abyss between you and people unlike you.

There are several levels to this. One is that there are people who don't want our help, or we think they don't want our help, because they are drunks and don't want to be sober, or they are homeless and they don't want to apply for housing, or they are ex-veterans who can't talk to social workers because that schoolteacher tone of voice which you sometimes hear from social workers drives them up the wall, so they stalk out of the office. Some veterans have seen too much of death to really partake in the niggling, exhausting, bureaucratic rigmarole that you have to go through to get any kind of help.

One of the arguments is that they don't want help and yet, if we just leave them alone, we will be encouraging them in their bad behavior. So the argument is that if we don't destroy those homeless camps, we will be "enabling" them to go on being homeless. We should banish the word "enabling" from the language.

So let's do everyone a favor, and if we destroy their camps, then they will have no place to go and they will have to come in and talk to social workers and go into recovery programs. That's one theory.

The second one is the aesthetic notion. In my town, the little town of Santa Barbara, the argument is that we can't afford to have homeless people on the streets because we don't want them to frighten the tourists away. We want to be this perfect little shopping center of a town where people come for its ease and beauty. We don't want anything of poverty or suffering or homelessness to be visible because that will drive away the people from whom we're going to make our living. And this concern overrides all others.

If I go talk to City Council members, even liberal City Council members, they will tell me that they can't do certain things because they feel so much pressure from the merchants, and they don't want to jeopardize their own political careers.

Spirit: *These laws are nearly always driven by merchants who use the aesthetic argument to say the city must have a clean, attractive downtown with really cool shops, but really it's an anti-homeless crackdown for economic reasons.*

Marin: Yes!

Spirit: *Merchants want higher profits, and city managers want higher sales tax revenues and a thriving business economy. Is that a major reason for anti-homeless crackdowns, in your experience?*

Marin: I make this argument in my town all the time, and I'm sort of an anathema to merchants. But I also want to be fair, and I understand that on our main street, we have a lot of small, local businesses, and they have genuinely had hard times the last five or ten years. Now, they haven't had hard times because there are homeless people in the streets.

But their own hard times, caused by other reasons, make them very nervous about anything that might affect their business. I don't think the homeless affect their business, but they are nervous about their futures and their livelihoods, because life is not so easy for them either. They are small businessmen. They are not giant corporations. I don't want to defend them, but my point is that it's the politicians who give in to them who are the distressing factor.

Merchants are always going to do what these merchants do. It comes with the territory. But what I don't understand are the liberal politicians who are so politically ambitious that they will not jeopardize their careers by taking any stand because it's the right one to take. That's the part that drives me crazy, and I deal with that all the time, and I've dealt with that for 25 years. Mostly, it's liberal politicians in my town, not conservative politicians.

Spirit: *Almost all the anti-homeless laws in the Bay Area have been passed by liberals who want the public to vote them back into office. They believe the public disdains the homeless, so they go against all their principles just to get re-elected.*

Marin: That's right. Even the liberals are just unspeakably awful because they worry more about their careers than they do about the poor.

Spirit: *These are the city officials who refuse to bend zoning laws to build housing, then they arrest and banish the poor.*

Marin: In my town, we have, every two weeks, a big symposium or discussion or conference about homelessness and how to fix it. And this is the scary part. This is the part that really disturbs me as an advocate. I cannot get the affordable housing people, or the recovery program people, to oppose the laws that criminalize sleeping in a tent or a park. Do you understand that?

Spirit: *No, I can't understand why service providers won't oppose the anti-homeless laws. It's exactly the same thing here in the Bay Area. Most of the affordable housing groups and recovery programs would not take a stand with the activists in fighting the Berkeley ballot measure to criminalize homeless people for sitting on the sidewalk. It was such a sell-out. How do you understand it?*

Marin: Well, basically, they are now government-financed service providers. Here's the distinction: They are against homelessness as a problem or a social crisis, but they are not *for* individual homeless people. Do you see the distinction?

Spirit: *Why would service providers not be more concerned about the real people on the streets whose rights are trampled by discriminatory laws?*

Marin: Because they don't know any of the homeless people. They know them only because they sit across the desk from them as social workers and service providers. They have a program to which people have to apply and they have hoops through which people have to jump. But they're not out on the streets living with people or helping them day by day. They're not advocates for the person; they're advocates for the program, and that's a very different thing.

Spirit: *But even so, why do they refuse to take a public stand against the inhumanity of laws that criminalize the poor?*

Marin: Because they're part of the class that we're talking about, that's why. They are good members of the privileged class. They don't identify with the poor. That's a different thing altogether.

Sometimes, you do run into great social workers who *identify* with the poor. We have them in my town. Sometimes they're vets, and they see guys on the streets who they fought with, and they understand that these are guys just like them. They were their buddies. And they fight for them in a different way than the professional social workers.

We have, in my town, two or three people who work with homeless people on the street and bring them food and bring them clothes and help them as best they can survive in the way they are. And those are terrific people — they're like saints — but we only have two or three of them, and the others are gone now.

Spirit: *It seems that the dedicated activists who cared about homeless persons, and worked with them as equals, are being replaced by a new breed of career-oriented social workers who lay down endless rules for the poor, with very little understanding of their lives.*

Marin: "Tough love" — that's another phrase we should ban from the language. I have a story about this for you. We have a jail seven miles out of town, and because of budget problems and overcrowding, the jail releases about one-fourth of its released prisoners after the buses stop running for the night. My Committee for Social Justice runs a ride program, so if people call after they're let out at 3:00 in the morning, they don't have to walk seven miles back to town through the rain and cold. They get a cab ride.

Now I have been trying to fund this program for several years, because I can't do it myself forever. But when I go to my fellow advocates and say we need a ride program, they will say let's give rides to the drinkers who are willing to go into a recovery program, but not to the people who won't go into a program. These are *advocates* saying this!

Spirit: *Why would they be opposed to helping someone stranded seven miles out of town in the middle of the night?*

Marin: Because they want to force the drinkers into recovery. Or they want to punish them for not going into recovery.

We have nights where it goes down below 30 degrees, and when you get cold, icy rains, people are forced to walk seven miles back to town. You know, you ask certain questions, like why they don't support this, and I don't have an answer. In Brooklyn, we would have said, "They don't do it because they're assholes." There isn't another reason!

Spirit: *The lives of the poor and ex-prisoners must be very cheap to them.*

Marin: And drinkers especially — the lives of drunks are worthless to them.

Spirit: *In your essay, "Helping and Hating the Homeless," you looked at why so many homeless people cling strongly to their freedom and their familiar outdoor spaces, and avoid the shelters that service providers offer them. Most people do not understand why they have such a great dislike for the shelter system.*

Marin: They won't go near shelters because of the rules. In Santa Barbara County, a few years ago, four people in a 10-day span froze to death outside, We had one guy die in a wheelchair. So at that point, a doctor friend of mine and I went to the Board of Supervisors, and for three years, they had been developing what they called a protocol for emergency warming centers. We said, "Look we know you've been taking three years. We can do this in a month and a half. Just give us the money."

Two weeks later, we went back with 20 people, and two weeks after that, we went back with 200 people. And the County gave us enough money to start these emergency warming centers. That was four years ago, and they're still operating. They're allowed to open when it's going to rain or when the temperature is going to drop below 35 degrees at night. We have mats and people provide food. They're pretty nice operations.

What I found was that these warming centers were called, in social science parlance, "low-demand shelters." So people just come in, and they can come in drunk. They can come in and go out and come back in again. They don't have the same rules as most shelters, and the rules are why people don't go to those shelters.

What you see in shelters — and you know this as well as I do — is a continu-

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THE COPS

by Peter Marin

Let the cops come, man,
like the fuckin' mad gestapo,
tearin' down our tents,
rippin' our cardboard houses,
dumping our drum-fires
into the midnight streets.
Let the dumb fuckers come
knockin' heads, breakin' ribs,
pilin' us into their vans
and takin' the shit we own
straight out to the dump —
where else does it belong?
We started so many times
buildin' a world from scratch
what the fuck difference
if we gotta do it again —
puttin' up our tents,
erectin' cardboard houses,
buildin' our drum-fires
to warm the midnight streets?
We got nothin' else to do.
We got nowhere else to go.
The god-damned earth
belongs to us.

DETROIT

by Peter Marin

May they blaze, golden
in Jerusalem's light,
burning as if the hair
on God's beckoning arm
had burst into wheat
in whole fields aflame,
as if time was theirs,
as if the great fires
of love repressed
swept across thought,
as if eyes were hands,
as if need were touch,
as if loss were gain,
as if hope were have,
as if from the loins
of dream came truth —
theirs the brute pain,
theirs the bright sin,
theirs the bent sign
of love twisted and saved,
theirs the land taken,
theirs the soul given,
theirs the coming and gone,
the woods yellow and green,
the fields open and full
on the first and final days
of the rest of their lives
driven from exile into Eden.
Bless them now, Father,
in their loneliness;
forgive them, Mother,
in their sorrow.
Set their sad tables,
make their last beds,
open the shut gates
that all may come in.
May the heavens be an ear
for their stories untold;
in times past and to come
grant them justice and bread.

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ous process of infantilization, which is impossible for certain men, and especially veterans, to accommodate themselves to. So they won't go near shelters because they are treated like orphans and children.

Spirit: *They're regimented like prisoners in some of the shelters.*

Marin: Absolutely. I used to stay in shelters when I traveled on freight trains. They take your clothes, give you pajamas, turn the lights out at 8 at night. At 6 in the morning, you get up and no matter what the weather is, you have to go back outside for the day, even if it's pouring down rain — and that's it. So I know something about those shelters and I would rather have slept under a tree than go to one of them, if I had a choice.

Spirit: *So a large part of the resistance to living in shelters has to do with the fear that they will lose their freedom?*

Marin: We have a culture which has largely lost any sense of the value of freedom, or being left alone, or living life on your own terms. People do not treat this as if it is a good in itself. So they don't understand that certain people, among them many of the homeless, actually factor in the value of being left alone, or living life on your own terms, as opposed to help at the price of institutionalization.

It is astonishing that people don't understand this need for freedom. That's the part that's really strange to me. But, and here's the key to it, the people who are dealing with the homeless are people who have probably thrived in institutions, loved institutions and never lived outside of institutions since their childhood. Nowadays, if you're a child, you live in institutions from the word go. You're *never on your own.*

But these are guys who have a desire to be on their own. And once you get a taste of it, it is almost impossible to give it up. If you hang out with friends at the Albany Bulb, and then they shut down the Bulb, and you start going to a social worker's office or to a shelter, and you're sitting across a desk from someone who is using that schoolteacher's voice and telling what you should do and should not do, you're out of there!

Spirit: *People who value their freedom can't stand the indignity of being talked down to and ordered around by social workers imposing rigid rules.*

Marin: There are people who can't tolerate that. And the people who can tolerate it, and who even like it, have no way of understanding the people who can't tolerate it. They have absolutely no way of crossing that divide and understanding those who value freedom.

Almost everything in these shelter institutions is artificial. The requirements are artificial. The distribution of power and submission is artificial. It's not only artificial, but it's arbitrary. People with any minimal sense of freedom or independence are right not to put up with it. They are in the right. They are preserving some human values which all the rest of us should congratulate them for preserving. But of course we don't. Because by preserving the values of freedom and independence, they're a threat to the rest of us who want to lead simple and institutional existences.

Spirit: *It is strange that in a nation that supposedly enshrines freedom as the highest value, there is such disdain for freedom in real life, and an unwillingness to accept people who want to live in freedom.*

Marin: Well, here's the great irony. The people who defend freedom — God help us! — are the weird, reactionary, gun-toting guys who want to live in the mountains and kill their own food [laughing]. It's very strange that there is an anarchical streak in Americans, but this often manifests itself as conservatism, because there's a hatred of government and law.

Spirit: *We've also lost the very idea of a frontier where people can still seek freedom, like Thoreau at Walden pond or Huck Finn on the Mississippi. We're eradicating the last few places where people can live in freedom — vacant lots, parks, hobo jungles, places like the Albany Bulb where people can set up camps.*

Marin: We are indeed eradicating these areas. We are eliminating all unmanaged space and behavior.

In the religious tradition, there is a contemplative tradition, which is an adventurous, inward tradition. I think that some homeless people have more of that than we recognize. It's one of the things you sometimes find in their company. They may be a little strange and have a skewed way of seeing things, but many of them see the world on their own terms, as if they were seeing it for the very first time.

The point is that they preserve something that the rest of us don't have and there is something terrifying in the fact that the rest of us don't understand that. They preserve life as it is freely lived, outside of institutions.

But I don't want to romanticize homelessness. I think a lot of what we're talking about is a part of a tremendous suffering, a tremendous unhappiness where people are reduced, pushed out of society almost like animals. But part of our animal nature is this attachment to being left alone. Wouldn't it be ironic if some of the homeless people had preserved more of their humanity — just in terms of these reflexes for freedom, and their capacity for cooperation — than the rest of us have?

Spirit: *Even though all the economic trends and housing shortages lead nearly everyone to predict that homelessness will remain a massive problem, is there any sign of hope on the horizon, in terms of movements for change? We just saw an Occupy movement that did talk about economic justice in populist terms.*

Marin: I think the Occupy movement was a good effort, although they seem to be hibernating now. But in terms of homelessness, maybe not so good. We had some homeless people who went to their demonstrations and joined with them, but in general, it seems sort of like a throwback to the 1960s with young people involved and engaged. But I don't know if it was sort of a spontaneous combustion that disappeared or whether it will come back stronger than before.

My own feeling is that 20 years ago, the homeless people seemed to be better organized themselves than they are now, at least in the areas that I know about.

Spirit: *There's also been 20 years of social decay, poverty and economic downturns. That's 20 years of people on the streets being depressed and the economy being depressed.*

Marin: And dying. Every spokesperson in my town is gone. They lived down in the hobo jungle outside Santa Barbara, but of course we've destroyed the hobo jungle so they have no place to live anymore. Leaving that aside, a lot of the drinkers were guys who stood up and argued for their rights, alongside advocates who were arguing for human rights.

And now, every one of those guys I knew, except for one, is dead. And the advocates are retired and silent. Their place has been taken by service providers, which may be inevitable. They are all talking about providing services and not protecting rights — and there is a big difference between them.

Spirit: *What is the difference between protecting rights and providing services?*

Marin: Did you ever read the famous book by Jacob Riis, *How the Other Half Lives?* He was an influence on Teddy Roosevelt, and he wrote a book about the homeless where he describes them as vice-ridden immigrants who we have to get rid of by improving. We couldn't kill them so we had to educate them and clean them up.

Spirit: *He must be the patron saint of all social workers who are so judgmental of the people who come to them for help.*

Marin: I know! And when you read the book, it's like a racist tract. It's about Irish immigrants and Jewish immigrants and the way their apartments smell. It's fascinating. It is sympathetic, but it's denunciatory at the same time, which is the nature of the reformist tradition.

Spirit: *So he really is the model for the modern professional service provider.*

Marin: He is! The same people who built the sewer systems were the ones who wanted to clean up the slums, and they wanted to do it for the same reasons: It was hygienic, it was modern and it was sensible. Whether they did it out of any real sympathy for the poor is another question entirely. I would say the distinction between providing services and protecting rights is this: Service providers are dealing with social problems and the freedom-fighters are dealing with individuals.

Spirit: *So the people trying to protect human rights are dealing with the individual person — the soul, not just the statistics.*

Marin: Yes, that's just what I think. I think that's always the case. I think that was the case with the Freedom Riders in the South during the Civil Rights era. When they were doing the Freedom Rides, what they had on their minds were their sisters and mothers and fathers and brothers. They were thinking of people.

So I think true advocates are speaking for their friends. And I think service providers are the people who sit across the desk from you, whether they work for the state or a private agency.

Spirit: *You warn against lumping millions of people into the one catch-all category of homelessness because very different kinds of people run into entirely different kinds of problems. What are some of the main triggers of homelessness?*

Marin: It's one of the strangest things in the world to be in a room full of homeless people, and to see that whatever you are saying about homelessness applies at any point only to some of them. For instance, the people living at the Albany Bulb are only a particular segment of the homeless population — the freedom-lovers or whatever we want to call them.

First of all, there's women with kids. The welfare rules are such that women with kids and immigrant families very often run afoul of the welfare rules and end up on the street. Or their housing is so tenuous that even with welfare, they end up homeless, and have to go through the whole cycle again of trying to find new housing — which gets harder all the time.

Second are the elderly, who find themselves in old age left without sufficient money to pay what it costs to live. These are people with small pensions, these are widows whose husband died, these are people on Social Security who can't stretch it far enough to make ends meet, and others become disabled in old age and end up homeless.

So that brings us to the large numbers of physically disabled people, of all ages. Their disability payments are simply not sufficient to cover the cost of housing where they live. It increasingly takes more competence and tenacity to navigate the systems required to get off the street and find shelter. So you simply get large numbers of people who are exhausted and helpless so that they can't do what they are required to do on their own. That's why people miss welfare payments.

In Santa Barbara, we have a list for subsidized housing that is now six years long, but if you don't renew your application three times a year, they drop you off the list. And they do that so that the list doesn't get even longer than it is. But how many people who are on the street, or who are old, or disabled or mentally challenged, are going to be able to do that?

Then there are the mentally disabled. My county happens to have a particularly unsuccessful and failed mental health department, so we have large numbers of people on the street who don't receive any kind of mental-health attention or aid. As it is now, in my town, the budgets are so overstressed that they will only respond to a call for help involving a person on the street if they are an immediate threat to themselves or others. Otherwise, if they're just hungry or ill-clothed or destitute on the streets, they don't necessarily come with assistance. So they're on the streets, more and more.

Then, of course, we have military veterans, which is perhaps the biggest group. The number of vets on the streets varies from time to time depending where we are in relation to various wars. Also, they tend to die in their 50s, so all of the Second World War vets are gone, many of the Korean vets are gone, and we're beginning to lose some of the Vietnam vets now. Now, we're beginning to get the vets coming back from Iraq and some of them are ending up on the streets.

Spirit: *That's the point where the war overseas becomes the war at home.*

Marin: At one point, I remember seeing the figures from our area that, in the general population, one out of every nine males has seen service in a war, and on the streets, one out of every two men have seen service in a war. So that's rather an astonishing figure showing that wars, and what we now call post-traumatic stress, drive people into the streets.

We have many fewer services for men than for women, and also the shelter services for men require such a level of humiliation that men just say, "screw it," and don't accept the help that they're offered because of the form in which it comes. So we have men who receive less help than women, men who come from broken marriages, who have lost their jobs, who are no good at satisfying bosses, so you get a lot of them on the streets.

These are guys who may be badly socialized. Some are high school drop-outs, social drop-outs of all kinds, and a certain number of men for whom the German word "wanderlust" applies. That's people who can't stay in one place or stick to one job for a long period of time. I know a lot of guys like that. They are very hard workers, but they can work for a week and that's it. And they're out the door because they can't do the same job over and over again.

So there are those guys. And then there are what in my town we call "the travelers." The young kids who are still out there who just sort of take off, and you see them downtown near our City Hall in small groups, playing the guitar or asking for money. They just move from town to town.

A lot of them are the result of the foster care system, because they come out of that system and there's no place to go and they're not fit for doing anything, and nobody really prepared them for anything.

And then there are the drunks, God help them. The drunks sort of cut across all categories, but there are people who are just alcoholic and they lose jobs, or can't get jobs, or don't want jobs, and just end up alcoholics and addicts who live on the street. There's a sort of familiar curve which ends badly.

The Movement for Full Employment

from page 7

Others might volunteer at a food bank, or help a new business prosper. Study groups, public forums, and Internet outreach are obvious options. The possibilities are unlimited. This diversification would encourage the growth of new structures that foster social change.

Some minimal common ground throughout the network could provide all members with a shared identity, a sense of belonging to the same community. Toward this end, the network's mission could be: *to help assure everyone a living-wage job opportunity.*

The network's primary method could be: *to encourage and cultivate the development of caring communities whose members support one another in their personal growth, community building, and political action.*

The network's only specific requirement, to which all clubs would agree, could be that the members of each club would *meet at least once a month to share a meal, socialize informally, report on their activities and plans (with regard to personal growth, community building, and political action), and make decisions concerning future activities.*

A club could be defined as a team of three or more individuals who affirm the network's mission, primary method, and specific requirement. This commonality among all the clubs could nurture a sense of community, while allowing for maximum flexibility and self-determination.

A commitment to work consistently in each of the three areas addressed — the personal, the social, and the political — is important, because efforts in each area can strengthen efforts in the other two.

With most people, our emphasis shifts day by day. We may engage in political action only occasionally. But it seems we could reasonably ask others to dedicate at least an hour or two each month to help improve public policies. We vote because we feel it is our duty, even though one vote is rarely decisive. I feel a similar obligation to be politically engaged between elections. It also seems reasonable to ask others to devote at least an hour or two each month to strengthen a community in their home town, thereby helping to establish examples that can point the way to a better future.

Each day we can work on becoming a better human being, if only by paying attention to how we operate, acknowledging mistakes, and resolving to avoid them in the future. This honest self-evaluation enables activists to become more effective.

With efforts in these three areas, we can fulfill our obligation to do our fair share to secure for all people the human right to a living-wage job opportunity.

These full employment clubs could also help combat growing social isolation by nurturing soulful, authentic, face-to-face relationships that help people fulfill their potential. Members could expand and deepen their circle of trusted friends.

Most people learn from and are inspired primarily by peers they know and trust. To build a popular movement in this country at this time, we need to learn how to reach out to our friends, enrich those friendships, provide meaningful opportunities for social engagement, and cultivate compassionate communities.

IMMEDIATE OPTIONS

The full employment movement is beginning to blossom. You can help build this movement in your hometown and on the Internet. Your options include:

* Support the Jobs for All Campaign.

* Donate to the National Jobs for All Coalition.

* Encourage your Congressperson and Senators to join the Congressional Full Employment Coalition.

* Sign the Guarantee Living-Wage Job Opportunities petition.

* Participate in a Jobs for All Campaign planning meeting in DC in late March.

* Participate in or watch a live stream of the public forum on HR 1000 to be held March 22, 3-5 pm, at the University of DC Law School.

* Participate in the April 28 meeting to promote a $15 per hour minimum wage.

* Help plan a DC National Day of Action to back HR 1000 in late May or early June.

* Sign the Making Change at Walmart petition.

* Sign the restaurant workers petition calling for a higher minimum wage.

* Experiment with a "full employment club" on your own, or perhaps come to San Francisco August 15-18 to discuss how to foster a "full employment club network" as discussed above.

Let's help the United States live up to its ideals. Let's "promote the general welfare" and secure "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" for all, by building a full employment movement!

Wade Lee Hudson, a community organizer who lives in San Francisco, is author of the Guarantee Living-Wage Job Opportunities petition (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C-0wsHcIv20). To stay informed concerning efforts to secure living-wage job opportunities for all, email wade@wadehudson.net

Albany Shelter Program A Dismal Failure

from page 4

ing in the trailers, often none at all. And even some of the very few who have stayed in the trailers are not Bulb residents, but are from the city streets.

People are not even permitted to bring food into the shelter. Kim, a young woman who has special dietary restrictions, managed to bring in what she needed, but was forced to hide in a dark corner to have her meal.

Two men were banned from the shelter after urinating in a garbage can. One can hardly blame them. Anyone needing to go to the toilet has to be escorted by the manager who unlocks the door and waits until the person is ready to be escorted back in.

People admitted to the shelter are screened. Their names must be on a list of residents provided by BFHP or, if they are from the streets, they need referrals from the city. Whitson, certainly well known to the shelter operators, was greatly surprised to be told she couldn't be admitted to the shelter because her name is not on the list.

Their failure to even maintain an adequate list of Bulb residents is only a minor example of the inefficiency and generally poor performance of BFHP.

Their program is described as a "mobile outreach team" to connect with the people on the Bulb and to "develop housing plans and provide housing locations and placement." It also includes "providing information on all available safety-net services provided by BFHP and other community organizations."

In all these months, they have successfully housed only four people. Two others were provided housing that they found so unlivable, dark and cramped, that they moved back to the Bulb.

Attorney Osha Neumann expressed considerable disappointment with BFHP. He said, "They never delivered services in a way that's actually designed to help people with disabilities. They've simply written off all those people who don't have an income. They blame people out here for their failure to find housing for them. They've given all kinds of reasons why they failed — difficulty finding housing for people with dogs, or they don't have income.

"When I talked to people out here, person after person tells me that they approached the Food and Housing Project and said they wanted to go into housing and they never got a response. Some cases, they were simply told because they don't have an income they can't be helped. Some cases, they were told because they have dogs they can't be helped. Some cases, they weren't told anything, just never got a response back."

Neumann has spent a great deal of time at the Albany Bulb creating art, and he is on the team of attorneys representing Bulb residents in their lawsuit against the City of Albany. In his dual roles, he spends a lot of time building relationships with the people living at the Albany landfill — and that is a major element that is missing in BFHP's work at the Bulb.

"It takes real work with people, building trust, meeting them where they're at, literally, physically where they're at, going to their shelters and sitting down with them," Neumann says. "It takes ingenuity coming up with solutions. It takes a willingness to go an extra mile which is needed for people who've been chronically homeless for many years. They haven't done that. They've gone through the motions, waited for people to come to them, rather than going out to where they're at. And when people have come to them, they've very often dropped the ball."

As for information and help accessing services, the BFHP has done little or nothing. On the other hand, much support has come from the community.

Whitson reports that "Share the Bulb, East Bay Community Law Center (EBCLC), and Homeless Action Center (HAC) have formed an ad hoc coalition, along with various community members that got a little over a dozen Bulb residents benefits, food stamps and/or GA. They got them started on the process of getting disability benefits in a couple of days over three weeks. And BFHP has not gotten a single person, not even those they housed, anything. HAC and EBCLC, the two organizations that are suing the city, are the ones helping. BFHP never even referred people to them.

"And people from the community came out and helped people fill out the GA and food stamp applications with people living on the Bulb. And several people came out here and drove people to the Social Security office, sat with them and waited to bring them back. People who heard about it from the community, who heard about it through the coalition."

The City of Albany has not yet succeeded with these plans for a mass eviction, but harassment of the campers intensifies. A 10 p.m. curfew was established with citations being issued for violations, and people found to have police records are being arrested.

A police officer shot and killed a camper's dog, claiming the animal threatened him. Now the city has announced that the eviction will proceed. But the campers have not exhausted legal appeals. Community support for the campers is growing. Will the good citizens of Albany consent to their city officials putting 50 people out on the streets of a city with utterly no shelter or housing for the poor?

Albany Ignores Needs of the Disabled

from page 4

in back for people's dogs. When I mentioned that such an accommodation was required by the Fair Housing Act, his response was that the shelter was "close quarters" and would not be able to accommodate such a request.

In the same spirit, I knocked on the door to the shelter the following day and asked the shelter staff how one would go about filing a Request for Reasonable Accommodation to be able to stay at the shelter. The staff asked me what type of disability the requested accommodation would be for. I told them that people currently living on the Bulb have a range of disabilities. "For instance," I said, "there are people out there with schizophrenia and claustrophobia. My boyfriend has schizoid personality disorder and cannot be forced into enclosed social situations."

The shelter staff member responded, "Well, we don't have a special box he could sleep in, or anything." This is the absolute height of discrimination.

I am one of several longtime Bulb residents who was denied access at the door to the shelter based on the fact that our names weren't on "the list" of Bulb residents. I am not aware of a single Bulb resident who has been allowed entry.

I am a disabled, homeless individual, who also receives Supplemental Security Income as a result of my disabilities. Albany opened its temporary homeless shelter supposedly for use by the population of primarily disabled homeless individuals whose camps it intends to demolish.

I submitted a Request for Reasonable Accommodations (RRA) with the assistance of a local advocacy organization, the East Bay Community Law Center, as did 31 other disabled individuals whose camps the City also plans to demolish.

All of our RRAs were denied, despite each one being accompanied by a Verification of Status as a Disabled Person, signed by a professional psychologist. The severity and truthfulness of every one of our disabilities was questioned. The necessity of our accommodations were also called into question, despite the fact that each of our Verifications included an explanation of why we each needed the requested accommodations.

I was personally denied not only non-communal living quarters (as is needed, due to my disability), but also the presence of my caretaker and my Emotional Support Animal (both of which my Verification stated that I need). I was also denied the right to receive the services of the shelter program at an alternate site that could accommodate my needs.

My request was denied, and the 31 other requests that were submitted at the same time also were all denied, without any effort or willingness on the part of the City of Albany to engage in an interactive process to try to work out some way that we could utilize the shelter.

For City officials to deny us access to the only shelter in Albany is devastating to some of us.

The Fair Housing Act specifically makes it unlawful to refuse to permit, at the expense of the handicapped person, reasonable modifications to existing premises to be occupied by such a person if such modifications are necessary to afford full enjoyment of the premises. The Act also makes it unlawful to refuse to make reasonable accommodations in rules, policies, practices, or services to afford a handicapped person equal opportunity to use and enjoy a dwelling.

The National Council of Elders



Civil rights leaders announce the founding of The National Council of Elders in Greensboro, North Carolina, seated in front of the massive statue honoring the Greensboro Four civil rights activists.

from page 1

Council of Elders was instituted when 23 elders gathered from all of these various movements — the farm workers movement, the labor movement, the cultural movements of the 1960s and Dr. King's movement.

We organized in Greensboro, North Carolina, and the National Council of Elders made this statement as part of the Greensboro declaration: "We will undertake with you the work that we have been called for, doing everything in our power to bring a greater measure of justice, equality, and peace to our country and to the world."

The National Council of Elders will have hearing sessions around the nation this year, in 2014, wherever elders are gathered. Elders have formed themselves into an organization to listen. We will listen to the community, listen to the cries of our people, to the concerns of our people, to the pains and aches and suffering of our people, so that we can get some understanding of how we can provide skills and tools for our young people to manage in this world today. We elders have a very special responsibility.

I began my own personal journey as a young man back in 1950, before the movement of Dr. King and Rosa Parks, when a group of young people, myself included, went to Washington, D.C., the summer after we graduated from high school, and began to learn and practice nonviolence as we tried to desegregate Washington, D.C. In 1950, Washington, D.C., was segregated into white and black lunch counters and swimming pools and movie houses.

Recently, someone asked me what inspired me to get engaged in the work for justice. I answered that I was not inspired, I was propelled. I was compelled because I was born in 1932 in the midst of the Depression. I grew up in segregation in northern Ohio, with segregated white lunch counters and black restaurants.

The very conditions under which I was born as a black man in this nation made it necessary for me to get engaged in fighting against the oppression that I saw. So all of us are called by the circumstances into which we were born in this nation, to get engaged in making America a better place for ourselves, and for our children and our grandchildren.

We did not ask for it. We did not start this struggle, but we were born into it. And the only thing we can do now is to struggle against it, but also live in it and learn how to be a human being, a full child of God, at the same time we are trying to change the racism, the sexism, the homophobia, the things that break us down and divide us and make us less of a people. I know I'm preaching to the choir!

So that's our Council of Elders. It represents all of the major movements of the 20th century, and people are coming together and beginning to learn.

I grew up in a town where we would go to church and have Sunday dinner around the dinner table. My family, my sisters and brother, and my mother and my father, would count how many African Americans were lynched that week. As a boy, I remember in the black newspapers, they would publish every week how many of us got lynched across the United States.

So we started the hearing panels to listen to the cries of the people. Trayvon Martin had something to do with our understanding that to be born and to be a young black man, it is dangerous for them to walk around the street and simply be a human being because they are liable to run into somebody who is afraid for their life and who will shoot them, much like the lynchings when I grew up.

We have to do something about the attitude of the majority of people in the United States who are European Americans, about their fear of people of color, if they believe that they have the right to shoot if they are fearful. That's a mentality, sisters and brothers, that we have to do something about. We have to change it because it threatens my grandson, a 20-year-old. It threatens his ability to walk around and be a full human being, because there are some people who are afraid of him and might kill him. There is much we have to do as elders. Because in the little time that I have left — I am 82 now — I want to make the world a little bit safer for my grandson than it is today, and that means you and I have a lot of work to do in our nation.

I believe strongly that the way we must learn justice in our land is by following the way of nonviolence, the way of Dr. King and Mahatma Gandhi, the way of love.

My great-grandfather was named Henry Dangerfield Lawson. He was a slave in Hagerstown, Maryland. At 16 years of age, he escaped and went up to Philadelphia and got on the Underground Railroad. He met a young woman who was the wife of the conductor of the Underground Railroad and they traveled up the Underground Railroad through Pennsylvania and New York State and they crossed over into Canada, where my Dad was later born.

It is that spirit that causes us to say that we have to continue to fight to make this nation what it ought to be. Our grandfathers and grandmothers who were slaves, who were oppressed, decided that once they got free, they were going to stay in this country and make it what it ought to be.

And they decided that the way they were going to do that was through nonviolent Christian love, even winning over slave owners so that those slave owners and their children would become sisters and brothers of former slaves and the former children of slaves.

We decided that this was our nation and no one was going to run us out of it through their racism or their violence or their fears. I'd say we have that battle still to win.

The *Book of Hebrews* has these words: "Therefore, surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight and sin that clings so closely to us and let us run with perseverance, the race that is set before us."

I suggest to you that this race is still going on. We did not choose the race. Most likely, we will not end the race. But we have to run it. We have to run that race.

There is a flower in Africa that blooms every 80 years. Imagine that, a flower that blooms every 80 years! Imagine yourself watering that flower and planting the seeds of that flower. That's a seed that may not bloom in your lifetime or in my lifetime. But continue to water it, continue to plant that seed, even if it does not bloom in your lifetime.

St. Mary's Center Celebrates Black History Month

Senior members of St. Mary's Center in Oakland honored Black History Month by dedicating themselves to working for Freedom and Justice. Rev. Phil Lawson gave an eloquent presentation about the National Council of Elders.

Lola Hadley, Johna Wilcoxen and James McGee, senior members of St. Mary's community, presented their own original reflections on what it means to face racism and injustice, and to search for a better tomorrow of equality and justice and freedom for all people.

"I believe strongly that the way we must learn justice in our land is by following the way of nonviolence, the way of Dr. King and Mahatma Gandhi, the way of love."

— Rev. Phil Lawson, speaking at St. Mary's Center during Black History Month

I Got Tired

by Lola Hadley

I'm tired.
I'm ready to go through my past,
empty my suitcase, to have a future.
And people don't know, don't want to hear,
what it was like for Blacks to live in the South.
I watched my parents scrape to provide for
the family. They worked several jobs just for us.
They hid what we had from the
social service case workers.

I know what it was like, it wasn't nice for us at all.
It wasn't right or pretty, it wasn't fair at all.
I had my auntie to talk to, she'd listen and
I'd feel better. She went through it too.
You've got to live it to understand.

In His Steps

by Johna Wilcoxen

The single criterion for judgment offered by Jesus in his account of the World's Final judgment is our behavior toward the poor, the hungry, the imprisoned, the homeless, the sick.

Jesus we pray for this frail, elderly woman, age 92, who lives in fear of eviction by a wealthy landlord.
As we pray that the path to prosperity is not the highway to homelessness,
Remember they too have dreams.
Let us all share the M.L.K. Jr. dream because although we have a River of Tears
let us not have another year of darkness, homelessness, or hunger.

The Eye of God is Watching.
What Will He See?

America

by James E. McGee

We call it America, the beautiful.
Beauty it is, but things that have happened in the past are definitely not beautiful.

How many men have fallen because of their color and their beliefs?
We think of Martin Luther King, Malcom X, John F. Kennedy, Bobby Kennedy and many others who died because they were Black or because of their beliefs.

Martin Luther King and Malcom X championed the cause for Racial Justice.
And the Kennedy brothers were killed because of their supportive stands.

Rosa Parks supported Equal Rights in riding a public bus. And Marilyn Monroe died because of her association with the Kennedy brothers.

Many more Black men, women and children died because of the color of their skin.
And we ask Why they DIED!!!

You and We get our Heaven and Hell Right here on Earth. God Bless Us All.